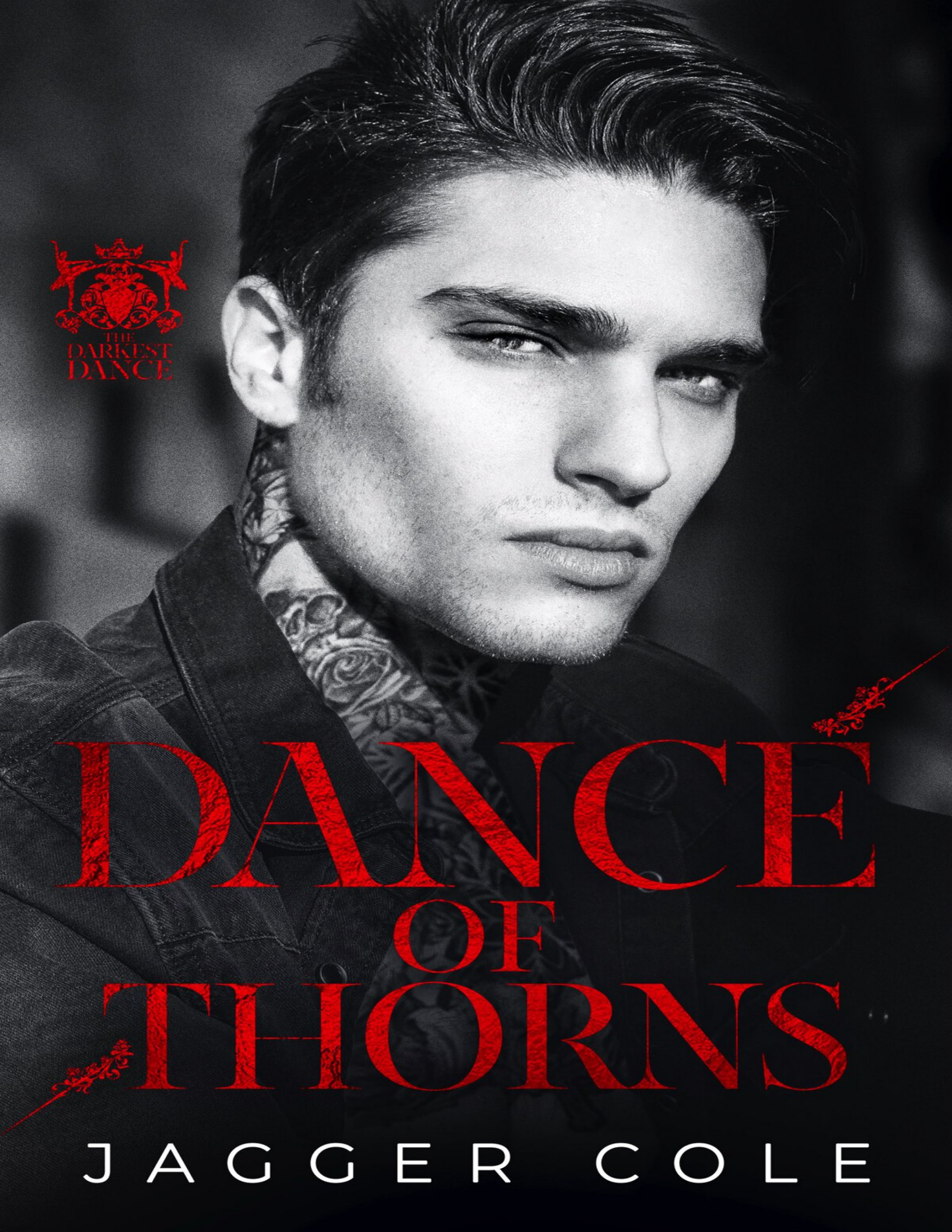
THE DARKEST DANCE
DANCE OF THORNS
JAGGER COLE

DANCE OF THORNS

A DARK FORCED MARRIAGE MAFIA ROMANCE

JAGGER COLE

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Dance of Thorns
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Every Day Is Exactly The Same - Nine Inch Nails
Mistaken for Strangers - The National
Aphrodite - Sam Short
A Girl Like You - Edwyn Collins
The Killing Moon - Echo & the Funnymen
Special - mercury
Mad World - Gary Jules, Michael Andrews
How Soon Is Now? - The Smiths
I Won’t - Britton
The Weakness - Ruston Kelly
Heavy Metal - Madi Diaz
Everlong - Foo Fighters
Hurt - Johnny Cash
Mr. Sandman - SYML
Biblical Love - Flower Face
Pyro - Kings of Leon
Strong Enough - Scala & Kolacny Brothers
Dragula - Rob Zombie
Too Good to Be True - ORGAVSM
Jason - The Midnight, Nikki Flores
Stand By Me - Stephen Wilson Jr.

3326 - Ólafur Arnalds
Zombie - YUNGBLUD
Getaway Car - Marc Scibilia
the angel of 8th ave. - Gang of Youths
If There’s A Heaven - Noah Cyrus, Stephen Wilson Jr.

Listen to the playlist on Spotify!

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TRIGGER WARNING

Dear Reader,

Dance of Thorns, like many of my books, contains darker, graphic themes and elements, and delves into some **very** heavy topics.

Suicide, self harm, drug addiction, SA, and mental health issues feature *very* prominently in this story, along with scenes involving CNC, impact play, and somno activities.

While these scenes were written to create a more vivid, in-depth story, they may be triggering to some readers. *Please* know your own triggers and limits, and read with that in mind.

Thanks for reading,

Jagger

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1

DOVE

THE WHOLE WORLD is on fire.

Searing embers swirl through the air, stinging my flesh like angry wasps. I choke on hot ash and the smell of death, wheeze smoke through my cracked lips pressed to the floor.

My head spins, chaotic fractals of light exploding like bombs, my ears ringing.

What's happening.

Where am I.

Why am I on fire.

There's a crashing, splintering sound, barely audible over the roar of the flames and the whoosh of the oxygen being sucked out of the room and my lungs.

Men scream and yell. I hear the staccato *pop-pop-pop* of gunfire.

Hot, sticky wetness oozes down my face. I cry out pathetically, my voice choking off when I try to move my arm, pain slicing through my bones like a knife. I try the other arm, still coughing up ash as I bring a hand to my scalp.

Where the fuck is my hair.

I touch only bald skin, marred with razor bumps and nicks, dusted with ash and little specks of spitting ember fireflies. I jerk my hand back, and see sticky red blood coating my fingers.

More screaming and yelling. A voice, over and over.

"*Dove!*"

"*DOVE!*"

"*MS. MARCHETTI!!!*"

They're looking for someone.

I try to form words, call for help.

I'm here.

Please, come save me.

And whoever else you're looking for…

Save her, too.

Save my friend.

The angry wasps fill my vision, stinging my eyes and scorching my flesh as I cry out for help through bleeding lips. The walls around me creak, groaning for mercy as flames engulf the world.

What's happening.

Where am I.

But it's the next thought that turns my blood to ice, even with flames licking across the floor toward me and hot smoke searing my lungs.

WHO am I.

My mind races, the gears turning laboriously as I try to connect dots I can't see. Tears seep from the corners of my eyes, running down my face together with the sticky red blood to pool under my cheek, pressed to the floor.

Help.

Help me.

Help her, too.

Who is she.

Who are YOU.

"*DOVE!*"

"*MS. MARCHETTI!*"

The voices are closer now. Suddenly, the blackened, scorched air is split by the sound of wood cracking. A door splinters, and people I don't recognize rush in.

"DOVE!!" A man I've never seen before drops to his knees next to me.

Hands lift a heavy, burning weight from my arm.

"Get her the fuck out of here!!"

The stranger's eyes drop to mine, his face wreathed in flame.

"We're going home, Dove. We've got you."

Oh—that's me.

I'm Dove.

But who is the other, in the room next door?

"*Help her…*" The words fall from my parched lips as I'm lifted from the floor.

Flames explode from the ceiling as it caves in around us. My vision starts to fade to black, then snaps back to the hell around me.

"*Save her…*" I whisper. To everyone. To myself. "*Don't let her die…*"

There's an explosion that sounds like thunder, and I tumble into blackness.

* * *

“*Dove…?*”

“*Dove, wake up, honey.*”

“*You’re safe now.*”

White brightness stabs into my eyes like knives, blinding me as my eyes crack open. The smell of antiseptic assaults my nostrils. A steady mechanical beeping sound fills my ears.

“Are you with us, sweetheart?”

The blinding white begins to fade until I can see shapes hovering above me. I try to open my mouth to ask what’s happening, but my throat feels like sandpaper and ash, and pain cracks through my lips when I try to move them.

“*Shhh.* Just lie still, Dove. You’re safe now.”

The shapes come in and out of focus until I see faces looking down at me, haloed by light.

“Dove, honey?”

“Ms. Marchetti?”

I think that might be me.

My eyelids open and close, dragging like rusty blades over my eyeballs as I blink up at the faces surrounding me. The smell of bleach…the mechanical beeping…the others in greens scrubs behind the people surrounding me…

I’m in a hospital.

I’m waiting for it to all come back. But there’s nothing. Just a blank.

I start to fill it in myself.

I’m Dove Marchetti.

I’ve been in an accident.

My head *really* hurts.

Suddenly, another hand wraps around mine. I swallow dry sand as I drag my eyes up to his. Older. Stern. Maybe even a little angry.

“Dove, honey,” he growls, squeezing my hand. “Do you know who I am?”

No.

“I’m your father, sweetheart…” He scowls and whips his head around. “Why the fuck doesn’t she recognize—”

A man in green scrubs steps toward the older man. “She’s received serious trauma to the head, Mr. Marchetti. We don’t know the full extent yet.”

“She got hit in the head!” the older man barks. “That happens to people all the time! They don’t forget their own fucking—”

“The brain is a complex thing, Mr. Marchetti,” the doctor says gently. His eyes drag to mine and he smiles kindly. “We’ll run some tests to determine how extensive the amnesia is, and how long it might last.”

The man starts yelling at the doctor. But I’m distracted by another person I don’t recognize—a woman with auburn hair, sobbing uncontrollably as she leans over me, squeezing my hand hard.

“Oh, *honey*!” she bawls. “It’s all going to be fine! He can’t hurt you anymore.”

Who can’t?

More faces come to hover over me. One I think might belong to the man from the fire who lifted me from the floor. But the rest are unfamiliar. My confused gaze drags from one to the next, trying to identify them, a tightening sensation snarling in my chest when I fail to place a single one.

What’s happening.

Who am I.

My eyes slide from face to face, the sinking feeling in my chest turning into a bottomless pit of despair. Then another set of eyes locks with mine, and a cold, trickling sensation drips down my spine.

He’s younger than the rest. He’s also not standing in the semicircle around my bed. He’s behind them all, leaning against the wall by the door, his strong arms folded menacingly over his broad chest. He’s dressed all in black: t-shirt, jeans, boots, his raven hair slicked back from his deeply sculpted face. Tattoos snake down his arms and around his neck.

Jesus.

It’s like looking into the eye of a hurricane. Cold, hard, brutal gaze. A beautiful but stoic, vicious face. Blackness radiates from him like a deathly aura as he just…*stares* at me.

Angry.

Dangerous.

Hateful.

I tremble.

I know him. Rather, something tells me I *should* know him. But I…don’t.

So why does he scare me so? Why—

It hits me like a thunderclap.

Save her.

The other, who was in the room next to me.

“*Where is she*??”

I don’t recognize my voice. It sounds alien and harsh, burned by fire and smoke. And my throat feels like someone’s hand is wrapped tightly around it.

“*Where’s…*”

I trail off when they all turn to look at me expectantly. My pulse is racing: I can hear it echoed in the machines next to me.

I don’t know how to finish the thought.

Where is she.

Who the fuck is *she*??

“Where’s…”

My voice falters.

My other half. My best friend.

I ignore the pain in my throat as I try to swallow, my blurry gaze darting from one face to the other, pleading for answers.

“Where’s…”

“*Lark*.”

The man who said he was my father growls the word.

Her name is Lark.

My heart slams in my chest as I cry out and sit up in the bed, ignoring the doctors when they rush forward and tell me to lie back down.

“Where’s Lark?!” I blurt.

The room goes still.

“Oh, *honey*…”

The auburn-haired woman starts to sob again. The man who called himself my father narrows his eyes, his lips twisting.

The boy all in black by the door glares into my eyes with so much hate that it makes my soul wince.

“She’s dead,” my father growls. “They saved you, but Lark was already dead.”

Hot tears run down my face. The world caves in as I drop back against the bed and shatter all over again.

I don’t know who I am, or why I’m here.

Why I smell like smoke and chemicals, or why my head is shaved.

But I do know one thing:

Lark is dead.

And I’m pretty sure it’s my fault.

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2

DOVE

Exactly seven years later:

FROM UP HERE, you can almost believe that the world isn't as cold a place as it truly is.

Icy wind whips through my hair, pasting blonde and pink tendrils across my face. I brush them back, shivering. My bare toes curl against the concrete as I look out over the sea of lights twinkling like jewels in front of me.

New York is beautiful when it wants to be. I think that's why Lark loved it up here—even if I hated the gallows humor jokes she made about how she might get *down* from here.

But that was before she found happiness and love.

And died anyway.

Happiness and love…

I smile wryly as my gaze slowly drifts over the glittering city around me, past my bare toes gripping the very edge of the building and down to the busy streets eighty-three stories below.

Seven years later, I'm still looking for both of those. I'm also pretty sure that some things aren't meant to be found, not by everyone.

I highly doubt happiness and love are anywhere to be found on the eighty-third story mechanical maintenance decks of the Empire State Building. Maybe you'd find them a few floors higher, on the iconic eighty-sixth story observation deck, like in that movie.

What's the name? Right.

Sleepless in Seattle. Which has its climactic scene in…*New York*. Not Seattle.

That always bugged me.

A lot bugs me. Gets to me. Worms its way into my blood like poison or ink, until my veins run black like death.

I used to point this out to Lark when she'd convince me to come up here with her. Not the part about everything bothering me—she already knew that better than most. The part about *Sleepless In Seattle* having its big romantic moment here in New York City instead of the Pacific Northwest.

"It's a meet-cute!" she'd argue.

I'd point out that meet-cutes—those sappy moments when the two main characters meet for the first time in some diabetes-inducing way, like Hugh Grant spilling OJ on Julia Roberts in *Notting Hill*—happen at the *beginning* of stories, not the end.

Lark would tell me to quit ruining the moment.

To this day, I have no idea how she discovered the secret way up to the northwest corner deck on the eighty-third floor of the Empire State Building. I mean it isn't exactly open to the public.

But she did, and we'd come up here maybe once a year for no reason other than wherever Lark went, I went. And similarly, wherever I went, Lark went.

Until the night seven years ago, when I couldn't go with her.

Seven fucking years.

She'd be twenty-four now, like me.

I look down at the smudges on my yoga pants from Lark's route up here, which involves picking the lock of a maintenance storage room, shimmying through the extra-large air vent at the back of said room, and hoisting yourself up through a hatch onto the main deck itself.

When we'd come up here, we had no agenda other than to look out over the city. We'd share a set of headphones, one ear bud each, listen to bad emo music, smoke pilfered cigarettes, drink a little stolen vodka, and just… watch.

Watch the city twinkle, and the world keep turning.

Not having a clue about what was coming next for either of us.

This is the sixth time I've been up here since the last time I came up with her, seven years ago—every year on this cursed anniversary.

I missed one year. But I like to tell myself she'd totally understand why I couldn't come that once.

In any case, there'll be no *Sleepless in Seattle* meet-cute tonight. Just me finally taking the next step, one that I've been too chicken-shit to take the last five times I was here.

I exhale slowly, looking past my toes to the street below.

This has been a long time coming.

I close my eyes and think of her, and the night her life ended and mine went to hell.

It wasn't your fault.

I squeeze my eyes shut so tightly that colored lights explode behind my lids.

Yes, it was.

A shudder ripples through me as a particularly strong gust of wind tears up the side of the building, blowing my hair into crazy pink tangles. My hands close to fists as I steel myself, lifting my head to the sky.

The familiar gnawing sensation pulls dull and empty inside me. The itch. The hunger that'll always be there, lurking, daring me to cave.

You're never a *former* addict. You're one forever. The trick is not to be one that *uses*. I guess after tonight, that's one more thing I won't have to stress about.

A wry smile twists my lips as I look out at the world, knowing with supreme confidence that *I will never use again*.

There's a lot of things I won't ever do again.

Some of those I'll miss—a lot, actually. Ballet, for instance: the one constant in my life that arguably saved me.

The few friends I've come to rely on, like crutches.

Painting, my newer artistic release.

My half-sister Chiara…maybe.

I allow myself another smile.

Okay, I'll miss her too.

That's it, though.

I inhale shakily, looking out over the city below. Lark used to say the streets looked like airport runways, all lit up to guide a plane as it swooped down from the sky.

That'll be me soon; swooping down to land. Guided by the lights.

It's beautiful, in a way. And no, I didn't decide to jump from here for attention, or to make a scene. I picked it because, well, Lark.

She always joked that if she were to do it, it'd be from here.

Honestly, she has a point. It's beautiful up here. I've always loved this city, and one last gorgeous view from high above it all…well, it seems like a nice way to go.

I glance down to my shoes, and the letter tucked inside one of them.

I’m genuinely not sure why I took them off. I mean, I watch a decent amount of anime, and I know in Japanese culture, people always take their shoes off before they jump, so they can enter the afterlife without them. For respect, same as you wouldn’t walk into someone's house wearing them.

But I’m neither Japanese nor religious in any sense.

I guess it just…felt right.

I let my eyes close. I take a slow breath, filling myself with the sounds of the city. The rush of traffic, humming like a living thing. The dull honk of horns. A siren. The wind in my ears.

I wonder if I’ll have regrets as I hurtle toward the ground.

The sound of wrenching metal sends my heart into my throat.

My entire body jolts, fear and adrenaline exploding through me as I whirl and almost fall backward over the edge. Just as I right myself and jump down onto the roof deck, my gaze lands on the trap door.

It’s open again, and someone is climbing out of it.

I dart to the side, sinking into the shadows.

The figure climbs all the way out and stands tall. For a second, I assume it's someone from building security. But then he—it’s a man, I see that now—rolls his shoulders and shoves a hand through slightly shaggy hair.

It’s not security. It’s just…*some guy*.

I press myself flat to the wall as I watch him calmly walk to the edge, about twenty feet away from where I was just standing. My eyes go wide as he steps right up onto it.

He's tall, with wide shoulders and a tapered, athletic waist. His arms are muscled and covered in sleeve tattoos. I can see that because despite the chilly temperature, he's just wearing black jeans and a t-shirt. His arm ripples as he pushes his fingers languidly through his hair.

The fuck is he doing up here?

A flame flickers in his hands as he cups them to his face—a lighter. I watch the cherry glow at the end of his cigarette as he inhales, tucks the lighter into the back pocket of his pants and tilts his head up, removing the cigarette from between his lips and exhaling slowly.

He calmly drops his chin to look down past his feet, then takes another drag of the cigarette before he plucks it from his lips and flicks it behind him onto the roof.

He rolls his shoulders, takes a slow breath, and spreads his arms wide as he raises a foot. My nerves jangle.

“Don’t!”

The man turns to stone. He doesn’t flinch or wobble or freak out, like I did when he opened the trap door. He just…stops cold and goes totally still, mid-step into nothingness, like he’s daring gravity to do the rest.

“Why not?”

His voice is deep and slightly rough, but with a smooth, honeyed tail to it.

I slowly step out of the shadows. He doesn’t turn, but his extended foot “un-steps” from thin air, casually lowering next to the other one.

My brows knit at his question. “What?”

“Why not,” the man murmurs, pulling a pack of cigarettes and the lighter out of his pocket.

“Because...*don’t*?” I hug my arms around my body as I walk closer to the edge, near where I was standing before. “You shouldn’t jump.”

He chuckles quietly and lights the fresh cigarette. The Zippo flicks shut in his hand with an audible click of metal, and he tucks it and the pack back into his pocket. He glances my way, but the shadows that I feel draped across my face are similarly hiding his.

“You're one to talk,” he grunts.

My brow furrows. “Excuse me?”

“You trying to tell me you’re up here for the view?”

“I…” I swallow heavily, squaring my shoulders. “I am.”

It’s…half true, at least?

The man just takes another pull of his smoke, and nods a clean-shaven, sharp jaw my way.

“Is the view better if you take off your shoes?”

A stab of shame zings through me as I whip my head around to look at my shoes, still on the ledge.

“And that envelope,” he chuckles darkly. “That’s your grocery list for tomorrow, right?”

My face heats as I drop my eyes to the ground. My hands meet in front of me, fingers twisting together, picking at my cuticles. I do that a lot these days, which is why my nails always look like shit.

But hey, it beats using.

“Tell me why I shouldn't,” the man repeats, a smoky note to his voice. “Jump, that is.” He clears his throat, pulling my gaze up to his shadowed face. “If you’re selling any good reasons, I might be buying.”

I don’t know how to respond to that.

He chuckles dryly, without any real mirth. “Yeah. Tough when you don’t know the answer yourself, isn’t it.”

Suddenly, the guy *spins*—like, actually kicks one foot out and fucking *turns* on the ball of the other. My heart lurches, certain he's going to fall over the edge to his death. But instead, his raised foot lands squarely back on the ledge, leaving him facing the roof now instead of the abyss. He steps down, plucking the cigarette from his shadowed mouth and exhaling slowly.

“What if instead of why *don’t*,” he murmurs. “We say why *do*.”

I frown. “What?”

“Why are you going to jump.”

I notice that he doesn’t say “why *were* you going to jump”.

“I…” I look down, thankful for the shadows masking my face as I take a deep breath. “Because I’m tired,” I say quietly. “I’m just so fucking tired.”

“That's what naps are for.”

My mouth purses, even though he can’t see it in the dark.

“That’s a joke,” he adds.

I peer at him. “Is now the time for jokes?”

“Hey, if not now…”

A soft smile tugs at the corners of my mouth. “Touché.”

“Why else.”

I curl my toes against the rough, slightly gravelly material of the roof. “I don’t know… I don’t fit in.”

He barks a cold laugh. “Yeah, well, welcome to the world.”

I scowl at him. “Okay, asshole. How about you tell me why *you* want—”

“Because I’m clinically depressed, sometimes I hate myself and what I am, and I think permanent silence would be much fucking nicer than the constant screaming in my head.”

I blink, stunned by his brutal sincerity.

“Your turn,” he says, taking a drag of his cigarette.

I blink, trying to collect my thoughts. “I mean…” My mouth opens and shuts a few times and I lift my shoulders. “Same, I guess.”

He shakes his head. “Can’t steal mine. That’s fucking cheating.”

“I’m *not*,” I toss back. “It's just…yours was really good. That’s exactly how I feel. I’ve just…” I shrug. “I’ve never been able to put it like that.”

He doesn’t say anything for a few seconds, but I see him nod a little. “And there’s nothing you'd miss?” the honeyed low voice rumbles.

I cock my head. “Is this you trying to talk me out of it?”

He shakes his head. “Just crossing the Ts, dotting the Is.”

My eyes focus on the cigarette dangling from his shadow-cloaked lips. “Can I have one of those?”

I don’t smoke. Not really. I mean, everyone smokes in rehab, but that doesn’t count.

“Sure.”

He tosses me the pack, then the lighter. I pull one out, slip it between my lips, and then flick the lighter with my thumb, touching the flame to the tip as I inhale.

…And immediately cough. Violently.

He chuckles as I wheeze, and then do a shitty job of throwing the lighter and pack at his feet.

“You don’t smoke.” He bends down to retrieve what I unceremoniously threw at him.

I manage to get control of my respiratory system and shrug as I take another puff. “Hey, if not now…”

He laughs quietly. “Take that, Big Tobacco.”

We smoke in silence for a minute, fifteen or so feet away from each other.

“Got any family?” he finally asks.

I nod. “A dad. A sister.” My brow furrows. “A stepmom, but she doesn’t count.”

He snorts. “Because she’s a stepmom, or because she sucks?”

“The latter,” I groan. “Nothing against stepmoms in general, but she’s Disney-villain level bad.”

He nods. “That's shitty. Your mom dead?”

My nose wrinkles. “That’s….”

“What, private?” He gestured broadly with his arms. “Think we’re a little past keeping secrets from each other, don’t you?”

I smirk. “Yeah, she is,” I say. “Dead, I mean. How about you? Any family—”

“Just my dad.”

I tip my head. “You won’t miss him?”

“I’ll miss him a lot, actually,” he rumbles.

“So why—”

“Will you miss any of your family?”

I shake my head. “Not really. My sister, maybe.”

“Friends?”

I look down, thinking of the friends I’ve made at the Zakharova Ballet where I dance since getting back to New York.

“Yeah,” I mumble. “I’ll miss them.”

He exhales a plume of smoke. “And yet you’re still up here.”

“Yeah,” I nod.

“So, guess we understand each other, huh?” he says gently.

My mouth twists. “Yup. Guess so.”

He takes a last drag of his smoke, then drops it to the ground and stamps it out. His darkened face raises to mine.

“You want to do this together?” He shrugs. “Can you imagine how fucking dumb the tabloids will look, making up crazy stories about us? Forget jumping together for company, they’ll say it was some sort of twisted romantic thing.”

A twinge ripples through me as I find myself nodding, smiling grimly.

“Yeah,” I mumble. “Yeah, let’s go together.”

I drop the cigarette to the roof to stamp it out and then remember I don’t have shoes on, so I just leave it.

“Well, time's a-wasting,” he grunts, turning toward the edge.

“Wait,” I blurt, a lump forming in my throat. “I…I don’t know your name.”

“Does it matter?”

I frown, shaking my head. “I guess not.”

We go to the edge, twenty feet apart.

I look down. It’s a *long* way down.

What happens if I change my mind?

Then I clench my teeth tightly and think of Lark.

I’m doing this.

I’m so…*tired*. Of the demons. The guilt. The gnaw of addiction.

Of feeling like I’m insane, *all the fucking time*.

He steps up onto the ledge.

So do I.

I look at him, and smile a little when he glances at me, both our faces still shadowed.

Me and my anonymous partner-in-suicide.

He’s not wrong. When they find us, they’ll probably go crazy trying to figure out how we know each other. If we were in love, and this was some insane Romeo and Juliet thing. Idiot podcasters will yap about us. Politicians will weigh in, as politicians always do.

I smile to myself.

Maybe this’ll actually make things better for someone else. Maybe some good will come out of this, like more attention to mental health, or—

“You wanna count back from three?”

I nod.

I’m strangely calm.

At peace.

…and terrifyingly ready for this.

“Three.”

I close my eyes.

See you soon, Lark. I mean, maybe. I know neither of us believed in that shit.

“Two.”

I raise my arms to the sides, for no other reason than it feels dramatic and that's what Odette does at the end of *Swan Lake* right before she jumps.

Then I hear the crunch of boots behind me.

“Nah, fuck this. Hang on—”

I whirl at the sound of his voice right behind me, not twenty feet away like he was two seconds ago. As I do, one bare foot catches the ankle of my other leg.

Suddenly, I tip back, gravity wrapping its claws around me and yanking me over the edge.

A tattooed arm shoots out. A veiny, inked hand grabs a fistful of my hoodie, holding me fast as the breath rushes out of my lungs and my heart slams up into my throat.

I gasp sharply as my hands wrap like iron around his wrist and forearm, my entire body hanging at a forty-five-degree angle over dead space that drops eighty-fucking-three stories to the ground.

I am no longer strangely calm.

I’m just fucking *terrified*.

“Pull me up—!”

But even as the words erupt from my mouth, my eyes lift to his.

And everything goes cold.

A numb, ringing sensation whines in my ears, louder and louder.

Neither of our faces is bathed in shadows anymore. And suddenly, the man keeping me from falling to my death isn’t a stranger anymore.

His name is Bane Antonov.

He loved my dead best friend Lark.

The friend that *I* got killed.

And right now, he looks like he might just let me plunge to my death after all.

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3

BANE

I FUCKING *hate* how much this girl looks like her.

Lark, that is.

I've always hated it. Because Dove Marchetti isn't, wasn't, and never will be *anything* like Lark Peltier. *My* Lark.

For a moment, it's as if time has stopped moving.

The city hums and honks and wails beneath us. The bitter wind howls up the side of the building, sending her blonde-pink hair blowing around and making the tendrils flutter and wrap around my wrist.

Just like her grip.

There's pure terror in her eyes—at the almost-fall, yes. But more than that, it's the realization that of all the motherfuckers on earth, it's *me* who has her life in my hands right now.

Of all the gin joints in all the world…

…She had to pick *my* chosen spot to end it all. Here, of all places. And tonight, of all fucking nights.

This was Lark's spot. Not Dove's, even if Dove always was her shadow.

Her pampered, privileged, coked-off-her-ass, mean-girl mafia-princess shadow.

My teeth grind as my eyes narrow on her.

It should have been you.

I swallow as violence and anger clash in my head. For a second, I contemplate just…letting go.

Watching her drop.

Giving her what she came up here for.

Fuck.

I've been avoiding her as strenuously as I know *she's* been avoiding *me* since she got back to New York about a year ago. Before that, there were six years of her *not* being here.

But alas, all good things must come to an end.

Where Dove actually was the last six years, of course, is a mystery. Boarding school in England. Rehab in Switzerland. Married to a Saudi fucking prince.

I don't know and I do not give a fuck what the story really is. All I know is, right now, I've got her by the throat, and I am *relishing* the look of terror on her face.

I suppose if ever there was to be a moment where the planets aligned in such a terrible way that I met Dove fucking Marchetti here of all goddamn places, this would be it.

It's the seven-year anniversary of that night.

She'd be…fuck, twenty-four now.

It's so damn painful to think about.

Of *course* tonight would be the night for Dove to come here. She probably remembers the way up from learning it from Lark, same as I did.

God, that girl loved it up on this roof. She even joked in that dark, fucked-up way of hers about jumping from here. Not that anyone but me ever saw that side of her.

I saw more of her than anyone else, for better or for worse.

Sometimes definitely for worse.

But tonight, I'm remembering all the reasons I fell in love with her. The way *I* died that night, too.

"I…" Dove gulps, her throat bobbing against my knuckles. "I guess—"

She gasps sharply as I yank her toward me, pulling her down off the ledge with my grip still on the neck of her hoodie, until her bare feet scuff and stumble on the roof itself.

My hold releases. Dove coughs a little, dragging her eyes to mine.

"I guess we're both up here for the same reason," she says quietly.

I glare at her. "Some of us maybe have a *better* reason—"

"Bane." She looks down, her hands twisting as her brows knit. "Can we please not? For her sake?"

Her big dark eyes raise to mine. I want to keep being mad. Fuck, I will never *not* be mad. But there's so much sadness when her gaze meets mine, sadness that I recognize in myself, and somehow, a pressure valve releases inside me.

Steam hisses out, my fury dissolving into just plain anger.

"Please?" Dove says quietly.

I glare at her. Then I look past her, to her Doc Martens sitting on the ledge.

"What were you doing up here," I growl.

"I'm… I'm here for her," she mumbles.

I glance at the shoes again, and the note stuck into one of them.

Maybe throwing her off would be doing her a favor. She's even written my fucking alibi already.

I exhale.

Tonight isn’t about this girl.

It’s about Lark.

Dove sticks her hand out “Truce? For the night?”

“Fine,” I mutter. “For the night *only*. We can pretend we’re total strangers.”

I reach out and take her hand in mine.

…And something stretches awake within me. Something dark and malicious comes alive as my fingers curl around hers.

She smiles furtively, her eyes locked on mine as I stand there stunned.

Shocked.

Not sure quite what the fuck is happening right now.

“Nice to meet you, Bane,” she murmurs. “I’m Dove.”

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4

DOVE

HIS GRIP TIGHTENS on my hand. Viciously. Malevolently.

Purposefully.

And wildness spreads through my veins.

For a few long seconds just a moment ago, part of me wondered if he was going to let me fall. Another part of me questioned why I was even worried about that, since *falling* was the entire reason for coming up here in the first place.

But then he said two simple words: “hang on.”

Don’t jump.

Don’t end it.

Let me introduce you to the concept of doubt.

And that’s when the house of cards collapsed. For now, at least. It’s not like two words cured me, or “fixed me”, or excised the bad, rotten parts.

Because that doubt is what I feared most about the moments that could come after I stepped off the roof. Not the drop itself. Not feeling my stomach lurching into my throat as gravity yanked me down. Not the brutal, messy stop at the end.

It was the idea that I’d step off that ledge, and I’d get thirty whole feet before I’d have second thoughts about what the actual fuck I had just done,

followed by eighty-odd stories of free-fall to the street below to wallow in my mistake.

That’s what he did when he said those two words.

Hang.

On.

He gave me doubt, and suddenly I *did not* want to fall. Which is what made it terrifying when we locked eyes, seeing each other for who we were, and I saw that venomous glint of fury in his gaze.

I don't blame him.

Seven years ago, he took something from me: a piece of the only true friend I ever had. A large, heart-shaped piece.

And in return, I took her away from him.

From both of us.

From everyone.

So yes, part of me thought he’d let me fall a moment ago. But then he pulled me back to safety.

I swallow uncomfortably, feeling the heat and power in his hand as it grips mine tightly, one finger laced over the delicate tattoo of a ballet slipper on my ring finger and another gently stroking the burn scar on the back of my hand.

His lips curl slightly at the corners with a hint of…well, not a smile. Bane Antonov doesn’t do smiles. But at least he doesn’t look murderous anymore.

For a half second, a flicker of something forbidden and wrong curls inside me. In that instant, I’m not me, he’s not *him*, and there is no brutal past between us. He’s just a stunningly gorgeous man—and dark and broody, but, please, as if that isn’t part of the appeal—looming over me on a dark, secluded roof with the city laid out before us, my hand in his.

…For a long moment, all I can focus on is the sharp line of his cheekbones. The razor edge of his jaw. The thick black of his lashes, and the soft yet masculine curve of his lips…

Fucking hell.

I banish those thoughts, torching that dark little corner of my mind to burn away any last remnants of them, because they're toxic.

We stand like that for I don't even know how long, my last completely cringe comment of "Nice to meet you, Bane. I'm Dove" still hanging in the air.

Finally, he clears his throat as his hand squeezes mine.

"Nice to meet you, Dove."

And then he smiles.

He fucking *smiles*. And time doesn't go backward. Up does not become down. Black stays black, instead of turning to white.

What is actually happening right now.

Bane exhales and lets his hand drop. I realize I've kept mine where it is a moment longer than normal, and quickly bring it down to my side.

I'm being fucking weird. I'm overanalyzing. That happens if I don't take my meds. And I didn't tonight, since I didn't think taking or not taking them would make much of a difference once my brains were splattered over the sidewalk in front of the 34th street Ulta store.

Bane slips a cigarette between his lips.

"I didn't know you smoked this heavily."

He pauses, his hand with the lighter barely out of his pocket as his eyes flick to mine. "I don't." His brows knit. "Not normally."

He removes the unlit cigarette from his mouth and sticks it behind his ear. His eyes refocus on me, locking with mine as I try not to shake or say something fucking stupid again.

“Were you really going to?” he finally asks, his voice still dripping that baritone honey.

“Were you?”

“I don’t know.” He looks away before turning back to me. “Maybe. I think so.”

The words form in my mouth before withering and dying on my tongue. But I clear my throat and breathe new life into them.

“Because of her?” I cringe. “I mean…because—”

“I know what you mean.” He nods his head. “Yeah, partly. The rest…”

“I get it,” I say quietly.

He exhales, his gaze finding mine. “We’ve gone too long without talking,” he growls. “About her, I mean.”

I smile weakly. “I agree.”

He nods. “Look, what if…” His brow knits. “What if we tried a little harder? I have to go do a thing right now. But—”

“You made *plans*?”

I quietly curse myself.

He smirks. “Plans I was hoping I’d have an ironclad way of getting out of. But…” He shrugs. “Here we are.” He sighs. “Tomorrow night… What if we talked?”

My brows arch. “You mean we meet again and convince each other why we shouldn’t kill ourselves? I think I’ve read this book.”

He rolls his eyes. “Congrats. Join the other several million people who’ve read Nick Hornby.” Bane shakes his head. “I was thinking more that we could talk about *her*. About what we do now, and how we exist in this city without her.”

“I think I’d like that,” I say quietly. Relief floods through me when he smiles.

“So, we'll meet up here again?”

I nod. “Same time?”

“Yeah. But if you’re running late…” He cocks one brow. “Watch out for falling objects.”

I grimace. “That’s…dark.”

“Says the girl with her shoes on the edge of the 83rd floor of the Empire State Building.”

* * *

THE NEXT NIGHT, I'm back.

Wearing a *skirt*, for fuck’s sake. I’m even wearing freaking lipstick—a soft rose color that smells a little like cinnamon which I happen to love.

I’ve spent the last several hours convincing myself I didn’t dress up for Bane. I’m just dressed a little nicer than last night, because why not? We’re here to celebrate and mourn someone we both loved, and Lark deserves it.

That’s who I dressed up for.

Not her moody, grumpy, somewhat terrifying fiancé from seven years ago.

I pace the roof near the ledge, glancing at the lights of the city, then down to where my nails are picking at my cuticles. The wrenching sound of metal rips my attention from my bloodied fingertips to the trap door as Bane climbs out of it.

He’s all in black, as usual. But I can’t help but smile a little to myself when I see that he’s exchanged his standard black t-shirt for a black button-up.

He turns, and when his gaze lands on me, a spark lights in his eyes. His lips curl—a little dangerously, a little sensually.

…That toxic wickedness coils and slithers in my core again. And I *let it*.

Bane slowly walks toward me, where I've stopped near the wall. He moves closer, then closer still. I step back, but he's still coming nearer.

He's almost right on top of me.

My pulse thuds in my chest. My throat works. Warning bells begin to blare in my head, but I'm not sure how to respond to them, even when my back suddenly hits the wall, stopping any possible retreat.

I don't like men this close to me. Even him. Maybe *especially* him.

"Bane," I blurt. "What are you—"

"You look just like her, you know."

Bane takes another step toward where I'm boxed into the corner.

"*So* much like her," he murmurs.

I swallow again. "I—"

He closes the remaining distance between us, his chest to mine.

"*Bane*," I choke, beginning to tremble, my stomach twisting. "Please don't—"

I shudder as he presses me to the wall, his hands planted on either side of my head, utterly caging me in.

Everything slows down. Even the wind whistling up the side of the building next to me, and the twinkle of lights, and the dull hum of the traffic below.

My hands land flat on his chest, trying to push him away. But suddenly, without warning, the world stops turning.

Or at least, mine does.

Because suddenly, *Bane is kissing me*.

Savagely. Malevolently. Consumingly.

I feel fire. I smell smoke. I hear screaming and alarm bells caterwauling in my head.

I see lights flashing.

Then another. And another.

That wasn't in my head. That's real.

With every ounce of my strength, I shove him away, wrenching my mouth from his just as his tongue teases over my lips. I pull back with a choked sound…

And freeze when I come face to face with the guy taking pictures not ten feet away, and a second guy with a video camera right next to him.

What the fuck—

My entire world narrows to the cold, brutal sensation of Bane's fingers laced around my throat as he pins me hard to the wall, pure venom in his eyes.

He leans in close, and his lips brush my ear.

"*Should have fucking jumped, little bird.*"

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5

BANE

"WHAT THE FUCK WERE YOU THINKING?"

It's a far more complex question than my father might realize. What *was* I thinking?

Several things. I've spent *years* considering what I would do or say or how I would act if I came face to face with her again. I suppose "revenge" would be in the mix. Retribution. But that barely scratches the surface of what I feel when I'm around her.

Maybe I wasn't thinking at all.

Nikolai Antonov pours himself a vodka at the bar cart in his office. He doesn't ask me if I want one too.

Nothing my father does is accidental, or a misstep. He doesn't make those, which is how he's successfully built our family into the empire it is today: a powerful force in the bratva world, one of the most feared and respected families in New York. Dad even sits at the Iron Table, with some of the other strongest bratva families in the world.

And yet somehow, even with all this weight on his shoulders, and even when he has every reason to be a cold, ruthless, miserable bastard of a father…he's not.

He's the opposite, actually. We've been among each other's best friends since Mom died. Even right now, after I've royally shit all over our plans,

he’s not *angry*, per se. Pissed off, maybe, which is fair. Annoyed…also fair. But I think “what the fuck were you thinking” in this case might truly be based in curiosity.

He turns, his flinty gray eyes stabbing into me as he brings the glass to his lips and takes a sip. He drops the glass again, fingers clawed over the rim as he rakes the fingers of his other hand through his dark hair that is only slightly silvering at the temples.

“We had this worked out, Bane,” he growls. “We had a plan—*your* goddamn plan, actually! And it was not *this*!”

He jabs his finger at the TV on the office wall. The volume is off, but the same paparazzi bullshit that’s been on all day is still playing across the screen.

The paparazzi bullshit involving *me*.

And her.

It's a video of what looks like us making out against a wall. She’s even gripping my shirt, like she can’t get enough of me as I devour her mouth.

She tasted like cinnamon.

Even though the volume’s off, the news ticker is repeating the same crap they were babbling about earlier: how the “shock revelation” of the heirs of two of New York’s most powerful mafia families found “canoodling” is “breaking the internet!!!”…whatever the fuck that means.

They’re all over the map with their info. Some reports are claiming we’ve been madly in love for years. Others call it a drunk hookup caught on camera.

Result: chaotic white noise.

…Which is exactly "what I was thinking" when I paid the two NYU media studies majors to follow me up onto the roof and film the two of us kissing.

The Antonov family, like most bratva families, works in shadowy, often ruthless ways. When there’s something we want, we take it, in any way possible, whether that be lying, or stealing, or outright war.

The Marchetti family has recently come into possession of a dock and shipping facility on the New York waterfront. *Prime* space, complete with warehouses, a container crane, the works.

Dad was prepared to pay top dollar for it, but then the previous owner sold it to Cesare Marchetti for a fucking song, because they eat pasta with too much garlic together. Birds of a fucking Italian feather and all that.

So I came up with another way in.

My original plan involved seducing the younger half-sister, Chiara Marchetti. Yes, she’s married, but it's an arranged situation and I know she is wildly unhappy.

And *oh*-so-lonely.

That's where I’d come in. Charm the panties off Chiara, arrange for the paparazzi to get some photos mid-fuck, thereby forcing a divorce, and furthermore, forcing Cesare to marry her off to *me* to save face.

We get access to the shipping facility. Cesare gets the muscle he doesn’t currently have in order to *hold* said shipping facility.

Win-win for everyone.

Well, mostly everyone. Not that Chiara is hard on the eyes. But trust me, she doesn’t want to be married to me.

Nobody does.

But that was before the other night, on the roof of the Empire State Building.

Two lost souls, ready to throw it all away.

Except I’m not ready to do that anymore. Not when I know what she did to take Lark away from me.

She took away someone I cared about. She took that life from me.

She fucking owes me one in return. And *this* is how I’m going to get it. That video of her and me is *everywhere* by now, and I know it’s forcing Cesare’s hand.

He doesn’t have many options. Either he does nothing, and it becomes even more impossible to arrange a marriage for Dove that is worth anything to him. Or…

My lips curl into a dark smile.

Or he saves face by making a public statement about his daughter and I being a couple and tells everyone he can’t wait for the wedding. The Antonov and Marchetti families become bound by marriage, and we get access to that fucking shipping port.

Game. Set. Match.

“Bane…” Dad sighs and shakes his head. “I agreed to this when it was *Chiara*.”

“Who’s already married,” I remind him. “This is an easier—”

Dad barks a cold laugh. “Exactly how is Lark's best friend—”

“*Dad*.”

There’s an edge to my tone. He eyes me, his mouth closing as he nods.

“I’m sorry, son,” he says quietly. His brows knit. “The other night was…”

“Seven years, yeah,” I mutter out.

Dad nods somberly. His eyes drop to the glass in his hands before they lift to me. “You want one of these?”

“I think I’d like two of them.”

He smiles quietly as he goes back to the bar cart and pours me a heavy splash. When he hands it to me, he subtly touches his glass to mine.

“To Lark,” he murmurs.

I just nod and then slug half my glass back at once.

To Lark.

The girl I loved.

The girl I sometimes hated.

The girl I was ready to entwine my life with, before it all blew away like dust.

Dad exhales. “Chiara is a cleaner execution of the plan. Dove is…”

“She works just as well,” I grunt. “I’d argue that she works even better.”

My father cocks a brow. “Really,” he says dryly. “Then why didn’t you mention her before, when we were creating this plan?”

I roll my eyes. “Have you *met* her? The gothy emo bullshit? The mopey ‘I write sad poetry’ vibe? Way too much eyeliner? I didn’t suggest her because I had no interest in marrying her, and I doubt she’s the marrying type. Chiara is.”

Dad frowns. I think sometimes even *he’s* a little put off by my capacity for ruthlessness.

“Also, let’s be real. Cesare chose Chiara first for an arranged marriage even though she's younger than Dove for a reason. It's the same reason Dove has been away from New York for years and no one knows where. The same reason she lives in the carriage house and not one of the ten—*ten*—available bedrooms in her father’s home.”

Dad looks amused as he sips his drink. “Which is to say?”

“She’s fucking weird.”

He chuckles. “Pot, meet kettle.”

“I'm not weird,” I say peevishly. “I’m…reserved.”

But the fucked-up thing is, she and I might have more in common than I care to admit, especially to Dad, who might wonder why I was up on that roof to begin with.

Dad smiles a little as his eyes pry into me.

“You’re okay these days?”

“I’m fine,” I lie, as usual. It’s not that I enjoy lying to him. But lying to those you love in order to *protect* them is another thing.

“You’re still talking to Dr. Turov?”

I nod. “Every Wednesday.”

“And you’re still—”

“Taking all the pills, yeah.”

He smiles wryly. “I don’t like to ask—”

“I know it comes from a place of love.” I flash him a tight smile. “I’m good, Dad.”

Another lie, to protect him.

I glance back at the TV, still playing the clip of us on a loop: her pressing her hands against my chest, trying to shove me away. But damn, if it doesn’t look like she’s trying to pull me tighter to her, like she just can’t get enough.

“You’ve spoken to Cesare already?”

Dad snorts. “What the fuck do you think?” he grunts. “He either wants your head on a platter with your severed balls in your mouth by breakfast tomorrow. Or…” He shrugs. “He wants you to marry Dove, like, yesterday.”

My lips curl darkly at the corners. “Then it’s settled.”

My father says nothing for a second, just looks at me like he’s trying to see through my armor.

“You don’t have to do this, son.”

“Of course I do.”

“Bane,” he sighs. “You’re my son first, my heir second. And no, those two are not the same.”

I smile at him. “I’m *doing* it, Dad. For the family.”

For the family, yes…but also for revenge.

She took a life. She owes me hers.

I knock back the rest of my drink and set the glass down. “Gotta run.”

“Bane—”

I stop mid-turn, glancing back at my father. His brows are furrowed, his mouth tight.

“You *are* still seeing Dr. Turov, right?”

“Already told you, Dad,” I nod. “I am. And I’m all good.”

Lies.

Lies lies motherfucking lies.

I turn again to head for the door.

“Why the Empire State Building?”

My shoulders tense as I pause.

“What were you both doing up there?” Dad asks quietly, like he’s afraid of the answer.

Honestly, he should be. But I’m not going to tell him the truth.

“Romantic views, dad,” I smile at him. “Really romantic views.”

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6

DOVE

THAT *MOTHERFUCKER*.

My face is white as I stare at the celebrity gossip show on TV, playing that fucking clip of Bane and I locked in what looks like a passionate kiss yet *again*.

I knew he was dangerous. I knew he was and cold, and ruthless, and possibly insane.

But Jesus *Christ.* What happened last night on that roof was some next level psycho shit.

All of that—*all of it*—just to fuck me over. To lure me in and have me drop my guard, which I *never* do except when it comes to Lark. And he got me on *that* fucking night of all nights.

He wasn't up there to jump. He's not depressed and tired of the world, of going through the motions. He's not haunted by survivor guilt, or the demons of addiction.

He was just there because *I* was, for all the above reasons.

And now he's nailing me to the fucking wall.

The video and pictures of us are *everywhere*. We're a trending meme, for fuck's sake. There's even a clip of it on TikTok set to that goddamn Celine Dion song from *Sleepless in Seattle*, which for some reason pisses me off even more than the memes, because *fuck* that stupid movie, and fuck that

TikTok video, and fuck the *one point two MILLION* assholes who've watched it already.

I've had my phone off all day to avoid the furtive, prodding texts from the girls at ballet. My...friends, I guess you could call them? I'm not really capable of friends, or of letting people in.

Brooklyn gets the closest. But even she doesn't truly realize how many walls I still have up between us. She doesn't know that two nights ago, I was flushing a torn-up suicide note down the toilet after barely *not* jumping.

Because of Bane.

"*Should have fucking jumped, little bird.*"

That mother. Fucking. Fuckhead.

I'm going to kill him.

"Dove…honey…" My dad sighs heavily, leaning back in his office chair. He's *smiling*.

"Absolutely not."

"It's an easy solution to the problem. Actually, it's a *great* solution to the problem. The Antonov family, tied to us through marriage—"

"*No*," I spit. "Not fucking happening."

Standing next to and slightly behind Dad, my stepmother Felicity sighs dramatically and rolls her eyes, petting the little shit of a dog in arms like a comic book villain. "There's that delightful sailor mouth, as usual—"

"Go fuck yourself, Felicity."

Dad chuckles as he leans forward, drumming his fingers on the desk.

Felicity scowls when she notices the expression on his face. "You're *amused* by the idea of her destroying this family's reputation?"

"Oh, I think you've done a *spectacular* job of that yourself, Felicity!" I beam at her, my voice dripping with sarcasm. "Don't worry, I'm not stealing your thunder."

Her eyes narrow as her overly-filled lips curl. “You little *cunt*—”

“Felicity…” Dad growls warningly.

“Yeah, *Felicity*,” I smile sweetly at her. “Isn’t it past your bedtime, young lady? It’s nine PM. Do your parents even know where you are?”

My dad shoots me cold look. Felicity, who’s all of five years older than me, gives me the finger. Chanel, her sewer-rat of a lap-dog, bares her ugly little teeth.

I glance over at my half-sister, Chiara. She's decided to drag herself away from playing wifey to Gio, the son of a mid-level Sicilian don based out of New Jersey, to watch this train wreck unfold back here at home.

She slowly shakes her head while staring fixedly at me. I’m not sure if she’s telling me to stop antagonizing Felicity or if she’s agreeing with me that this is complete bullshit.

“Cesare!” Felicity hisses, aggressively stroking Chanel. “Get angry! Your daughter is out there on TMZ sucking face with some Russian gangster’s kid! He's not even Italian!”

“Aren’t you German and like, Scottish or something, Felicity?” I sigh.

“I’m married to your father!” she screeches. “That makes me Italian!”

“No, that makes you a poster girl for better science education in public school—”

“*Enough*,” my father grunts. He leans back in his chair and rests his hands on his rounded stomach. “This is a blessing in disguise. That’s why I’m not angry.” He shrugs, looking right at me. “Honestly, I didn’t expect to marry you off.”

“No, I would think the general crack-whore aesthetic and junkie background probably would have something to do with—”

“*FELICITY!*” Dad thunders, turning to glare at his wife. “I said enough.”

He inhales slowly, drumming his fingers on his belly.

“She's right, though.” He lifts his shoulders. “I haven’t seen you up till now as…an option. For marriage.”

“You mean for personal gain,” I mutter.

“For the gain *of this family*,” Dad growls. “Like your sister has already done.”

I glance at my sister again, aka *Mrs. Ferrari*.

That’s actually her married name. It’s insane.

Chiara and I have never really been super close. Partly it might be the different moms thing. Mine died during childbirth. Hers was a club bunny dad was married to just long enough to knock up, cheat on, then divorce.

We’ve never really gotten along. Well, maybe we did at one point, but those parts of my memories have never returned.

Honestly, I doubt we ever did.

Maybe that’s why I never felt guilty all the times I secretly snuck back to New York to honor Lark on the 83rd floor—well, except the one year when I was in lock-down at rehab—and never called my own half-sister.

Dad frowns pensively, stroking his chin. “A marriage to the Antonov family,” he muses. “It’s actually…quite appealing.”

“The fuck it is,” I snap.

His smile fades. “I didn’t mean for *you*,” he mutters. “But for our family…” He starts to grin. “The Antonovs have firepower and men.”

Felicity scowls. “Sugar-bear, we have our own men—”

“Not like they do,” Dad grunts. “The Antonov Bratva is another animal, and it would be foolish to turn this opportunity down.”

Felicity turns her gaze on me, glaring. “But baby, Dove's reputation?”

Dad shrugs. “Her reputation is already trashed. I’m not worried about that.”

Gee, thanks a lot.

He clears his throat and looks at me. “I’ve already spoken to Nikolai. I gave him what he expected—the angry father demanding his son’s balls.” He smirks. “But I know what he’s really after: he wants access to the new waterfront property with its shipping logistics.”

Felicity frowns—or at least I think she’s *trying* to muscle her botox-frozen forehead into that expression.

“*Sugar-bear—*”

“He can have it, too. Because *he* has what *we* need: the manpower to hold it should any of our enemies decide to get cute and try to take it away.” He shrugs. “I already know what he’ll propose: firepower and protection, so long as he can use the port too.” He tilts his head. “Honestly, that’s a *great* deal.”

My mouth sours. “So I’m a bargaining chip.”

Chiara snorts quietly in the corner. “Welcome to the conversation, Dove,” she mutters. “Glad you could join us.”

I flip her off as my dad snickers.

“A bargaining chip? You bet your ass that's what you are. That’s a step up from being a reclusive junkie living in my garage, wouldn’t you say?” he snaps.

That hurts. I don’t know *why* it still hurts after all these years, but it does. But I swallow the lump in my throat and do my best to shrug off the comment.

“Oh, and Dr. Caruso will be by later.”

I flinch when I hear our family doctor’s name. I’ve known the man my entire life, and I’ve never once lost that creep vibe I get from him.

“I just saw him,” I mumble. “My prescriptions are all filled—”

“Not for that.” Dad grunts and clears his throat, looking vaguely amused. “He’ll be running a full STD panel.”

My jaw hits the floor as Felicity snickers.

“*Excuse me*?!”

Dad shrugs. “The Antonov family is insisting on it.”

I stare at him. “*Why* are—”

“Please!” Felicity snaps. “You know goddamn well why!”

I glare death at her. “No, Felicity,” I say icily. “I don’t. Why don’t you enlighten—”

“Because you’re a *drug addict!*” she shrieks. “And God only knows what you might have caught from all the men you’ve—”

“That’s enough,” Dad grunts, making a face and raising a hand to stop Felicity.

“*I don’t have any fucking STDs*!!!” I spit venomously.

Dad’s face sours again. “That’s a conversation I don’t need to take part in. Regardless, Dr. Caruso will be running a full panel.”

“The fuck does it matter anyway?!” I snap. “It’s not like I’m going to be *sleeping with* Bane fucking Antonov!”

Chiara snorts again from her spot in the corner.

I whip my head around to glare at her. “I’m *not*.”

She sighs. “You’re marrying him, Dove.”

“And?!”

She smiles. “And I think you have a *lot* to learn about arranged marriages.”

I shake my head. “Well, it’s still not happening. And I am *not* taking any fucking STD—”

“Yes, you are,” Dad says flatly. “But it’s your choice if you want to be *sedated* for it or not.”

My jaw clenches tightly as my hands close to fists. “And if I say no?”

Dad glares at me coolly. “To?”

“To all of it! To getting a swab jammed up my vag to find non-existent STDs!! To fucking *marrying* Bane, all because—”

“You were caught with your tongue down his throat!” Felicity hisses shrilly at me. “You stupid little—”

She shrieks, clutching Chanel to her chest and darting behind Dad’s chair as I rush her. Then Dad stands abruptly and stomps in front of me, blocking my path.

“STOP!” he roars.

I do so, my skin on fire and my pulse thundering in my ears.

Dad draws in a slow breath and then lets it out again.

“Everybody out.”

Chiara shrugs, stands, and walks out the door. Felicity lingers for a few seconds, stroking her pet rat, until my dad turns to her and sends her on her way with a “pretty little kitty” that makes me want to puke.

When Felicity finally stops blowing my dad kisses over her shoulder and shaking her Brazilian butt lift at him, and we’re alone, he sighs heavily.

“Sit down, Dove.”

When I don’t, he rolls his eyes as he takes his own seat. “Or not. I don't care either way.”

He leans on his desk, glaring at me. The seconds tick by.

“What?” I finally mumble. “I’m not doing it. And there’s nothing you can threaten me with to force me.”

He snorts. “I could kick you out of the carriage house?”

I shrug. “Fine. I’ll pack tonight. I’m not marrying Bane.”

He looks at me with a bored expression. “You have no money, no job to support your dancing and your fucking painting, both of which pay peanuts—”

“I’ll sell my body for cash before I marry—”

“Or I could simply make a phone call to that fancy rehab facility in Italy and mention that I found needles in your bedroom and that you’re relapsing. You know they’d be *happy* to take my money to bring you back there, voluntarily or *in*voluntarily. ”

The words hit me like a knife plunging into my heart. Acid and poison seep through my veins. I shiver as my face sours, and I glare right at him.

“*Fuck you*,” I choke.

Dad just smiles coldly. “I'm sorry, Dove. This is what they call check fucking mate.” He leans his elbows on the table and steeples his hands as he levels an icy gaze at me. “You’re marrying the Antonov boy, or I will burn your world to the fucking ground. *Is that clear*.”

I look away, doing everything I can to hold back the tears.

“Say it, Dove.”

I swallow past the bitter lump in my throat.

“*Clear*,” I choke.

“Good. This is happening,” Dad mutters. “You’re marrying Bane, and that's final.”

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7

DOVE

“CLOSED-OFF” is sort of my default mode, and how I typically present to the world.

I’ve also heard the word "prickly" one or two hundred times. Defensive. Unapproachable. Combative. Unreadable. *Thorny*.

I mean, it doesn’t take a psych degree to understand why I’m like this after everything I’ve gone through.

But yes, all those adjectives are apt. And in the last week, since the video and photos appeared of Bane and I making out on the top of the Empire State Building like some sort of goth-emo romcom, I’ve doubled down on all of it.

My walls are taller. The spikes at the top of them are pointier. I’m even more aloof than usual.

At least my friends at the Zakharova aren’t pushing for any details about it. I guess that's because many of them are from Mafia families themselves, and have been arrange-married.

Bottom line, no one’s being annoying at rehearsals. No one is asking questions I don’t want to answer, or making it weird. Even Val, king of the inappropriate jokes and comments, has been oddly quiet. Everyone's happy to give me space on the subject.

I shiver as the man all in black opens the car door. I step out, reeling in my nerves as I glance up at the tall, gothic building near the northeast corner of Central Park. Whenever I passed this building before, I always assumed it was a museum, or a private library, or home to a mustache-twirling supervillain.

How right I was.

Well, minus the *There Will Be Blood* mustache.

My throat bobs as I look up at the dark, imposing, almost cathedral-like building that Bane calls home because of course he does.

Yeah… My *friends* have been giving me space on the subject.

My captor is another story.

I pull my eyes away from the gothic spires and gargoyles—yes, really—as the man who drove me here calmly walks over and opens the front door. Passing through a lobby guarded by men wearing black suits and covered in Russian tattoos, we take a brass elevator lined with red velvet up until it stops and the doors glide open.

My guide stays put, wordlessly nodding for me to step out.

“Good evening, miss.”

A man who looks to be in his mid-thirties with handsome features, blue eyes and dark hair, *also* dressed in a black suit, nods stiffly as I exit the elevator.

“Master Anontov will see you in the library.”

Master Antonov.

You’ve got to be fucking kidding.

Although, when you think about it, I already feel like I just walked into Bruce Wayne’s gothic house of horrors, what with the marble floors, the dark old-world wooden paneling on the walls, and the gilded, dim chandeliers.

…Guess it makes sense that he’s got an Alfred, too.

I follow the tall butler-or-whatever-he-is through the sprawling apartment… if you can call it that…until we get to a set of heavy double doors. The man raps his knuckles once on the wood.

“Enter.”

I *hate* that I didn’t instantly recognize his voice up on the roof that first night. If I had…well, I don’t know. Maybe I would have jumped.

Possibly.

I’m not sure.

All I know is that when that deep, rich baritone rumbles through the door, something tingles inside me.

The butler swings the doors open, revealing a huge, stunning room, every wall covered in floor-to-ceiling shelves of leatherbound books.

I don’t have time to admire Belle’s library, though. Instead, my eyes are utterly arrested by Bane’s dark glare, leveled at me through the doorway.

The Lord of the Castle himself is sitting at a heavy, old-school dark wood desk, his feet propped up on one corner of it as he lounges back in his chair. A glass tumbler of what looks like vodka sits on the desk in front of him, glinting in the low light of the room.

“Ms. Marchetti, sir.”

“Thank you, Alfred.”

I blink, my head whipping around quickly as I rip my gaze to the butler, then to Bane, then back to the butler. I wait for the snicker, but it doesn’t come.

The butler—I'm sorry, there is *no way* his name is really Alfred—clears his throat quietly, gesturing for me to enter the room. When I do, albeit only by a few steps, he bows and then closes the doors behind him as he retreats.

Then I’m alone with King Asshole himself.

I drag my eyes up to Bane’s in the silence of the room.

“His name is legit *Alfred*?”

His brows knit slightly. “Yes?”

“Really?”

Bane frowns. “Really.”

“That makes you…what…Batman?”

“I’m heir to a bratva empire,” he growls. “Not sure I’m cut out to *fight* crime.”

I swallow, resisting the urge to pick my cuticles as I glance around the—frankly—*stunning* library. Under other circumstances, I could lose *days* in here. Give me a barre, an easel, and some paints?

I’d never fucking leave.

You might not…

I pull my gaze back to Bane, suddenly considering how insane it is *not* to keep your eye on the predator in front of you.

“Thanks for dressing up,” he says dryly.

I glance down at my outfit: black knee-high Doc Marten boots, fishnets, an inch-too-short pink and black plaid skirt criss-crossed with low-slung studded belts, and a black Nine Inch Nails hoodie.

I lift my saccharine-sweet smile to him. “I wasn’t aware that Wayne Manor had a dress code.”

“I mean, most of the world has an adult dress code of slightly above angsty goth middle-school theater nerd,” he says with his own humorless smile. “But you do you. The black and white photography class is right down the hall past ‘Hating Your Parents 101’. Not to be missed, either of them.”

I can feel myself start to grin, but I keep that same sugary smile on my face as I glare at him.

Silence blankets us, him still sitting casually in his chair, me standing stiffly in the middle of the room.

I clear my throat. “Why the fuck are you doing this?”

“Because in our world, one in which we’ve *both* been raised, marriage is a business transaction,” Bane says evenly. “Your father has a new shipping port. My father has men—”

“You know what the fuck I’m asking,” I snap. “Stop patronizing me. *Why*, Bane?” My temper flares. “Why are forcing the friend of your dead fiancée to marry you?”

Bane’s small smile fades. His eyes narrow a little, sending a shiver down my spine.

“You loved her,” I say quietly.

His face darkens. “More than you know.”

“You’re angry because I persuaded her to come out that—”

“Stop.”

He doesn’t raise his voice, but his commanding tone slices through me, silencing me.

“Bane.”

“Yes?”

I clench my body tight to stop from shuddering.

“Why are you doing this? Why me? Look, I know you manipulated me, and pretended to be up on that roof to…” I trail off, shaking my head.

To pretend you’re as fucked up as me to get past my defenses.

“You used my mental state against me, Bane. *Why*?!”

He lifts an eyebrow, a smug hint of a grin curling his lips. “For this,” he murmurs, waving his index finger back and forth between us.

I bark out a cold laugh. “If you’re that desperate for a woman to be in the same room as you, you’re even more pathetic than I thought. And I'm not here willingly, so—”

“Here’s how this is going to work,” he sighs, sounding bored. That just pisses me off even more.

“What. The fuck. Do you. WANT!!” I scream at him.

“You.”

The word silences me utterly. My pulse skips as a clammy tingle creep-walks down my neck.

Bane smiles like a shark as he steeples his fingers in front of him.

“I want *you*.”

I blink quickly, my blood turning to syrup in my veins.

“Meaning?” I croak, my voice quivering. I hate that.

“It wasn’t that complex a statement,” he growls. “And there’s no double or secret meaning to it. I. Want. *You*.”

“I—”

“You’ll be my whore. My toy to play with as I wish, when I wish, *how* I wish.”

My pulse is pounding like thunder in my ears as he drums his tattooed fingers quietly on the desk.

“That…” My throat is dry, making my voice husky and unsure. “That’s not happening,” I croak. “That’s *obviously* not happening—”

“I have something for you.” He nods to a folder on the edge of his desk, smiling chillingly. “Go on… Take a look.”

My nerves jangling, I walk over to the desk and take the folder. It falls open in my hands, and when my eyes drop to the first page, my eyes widen.

What the fuck.

What the actual fucking FUCK.

I’m looking at my patient intake papers, forms, and records from Il Refugio, the rehab facility I spent nine months in before moving back to New York.

Black and white evidence of my sordid past.

"*Fuck you*," I choke, almost dropping the folder. "You had no right!" I yell loudly, shaking. "These are *private*, motherfucker!"

Bane smiles coldly. "They *were*, yes. And they'll remain that way."

I blink at him.

"These are my medical records—"

"More like a written record of your history as a needle-jabbing heroin addict, aren't they?"

I freeze, numbness spreading out from my heart down every vein, as he frowns thoughtfully.

"I wonder how many of your friends at the ballet know the *real* you? The one who got kicked out of the illustrious Oxford Hills Academy for—"

"*Stop it*," I hiss, shaking. "Just stop it!"

I can't do this. I can't spar like this, not the way I'm wired—not with the fucked-up way my brain works. I just fucking *can't*. Anxiety claws at me, my nerves fraying and splitting. I want to curl in on myself, or melt through the floor.

Seconds tick by. Slowly, it occurs to me that he *has* stopped. I take a shaky breath, realizing my arms are wrapped around my body protectively, my nails digging into my arms through the hoodie. I force myself to unclench a little, relaxing as much as I can.

I close my eyes and inhale through my nose.

Exhale.

Inhale.

Fill the space. Just be. You are on your way to recovery.

Slowly, I open my eyes again.

Bane's gaze is still locked on me, but I resist the urge to flinch this time.

“Fine,” I say coolly. “You stole my private medical records. Congrats, you’re a piece of shit. So, what, you’re going to hold them over my head until I fuck you?”

He smiles widely. “Precisely. That wasn’t such a hard concept to grasp, was it?”

“You’re disgusting. A deviant,” I spit. “A fucking freak—”

“Why don’t you put away the stones, little miss glass house, and turn to the next page in your welcome packet.”

I sneer at him, angrily flipping past my rehab records—

Jesus H. Christ.

It’s my internet history printed out and staring me full in the face, a leering, lurid catalogue of my darkest secrets.

The medical records are awful enough.

This is worse.

Much worse.

“Did you hack my computer, asshole?!”

Bane chuckles quietly as he stands and walks out from behind his desk. “Now, some of these—the Dom-sub stuff, the restraints, the pain play—I mean, not that outrageous, little bird,” he murmurs with a sick grin. “But some of your other kinks?” He whistles quietly. “My, my, my. You do have *colorful* needs, don’t you?”

I’m shaking, the folder trembling in my hands as I stare at all my damning secrets spilled across the page.

“You’re a fucking monster,” I whisper.

“Oh, don’t play the victim card now. You should know better than that.”

I rip my gaze to his, shivering as he slowly circles me. “You don’t know a fucking thing about…”

Bane laughs coldly.

“*Please*,” he murmurs. “Finish that thought. In fact, let me get you a mirror to say it into, so you can see exactly how foolish you look.”

Bane continues his slow walk around me, sending heated shivers rippling over my skin as his predatory eyes rake over me.

“Why don't you turn to the last page now.”

It takes me a second to process what I’m looking at.

“No—”

“Go ahead, read it out loud. I want to be sure we’re both on the same page.”

“This is—”

“A prenup, of sorts.”

I bark a laugh. “You think I want your fucking *money*?!”

“I asked you to read it out loud.”

I stare at the page in front of me, then back at him. “This isn’t even a prenup. It’s…” I frown. “Wait, what the fuck is—”

“Read. It,” he growls.

“Fine.” My eyes drop to the page and I take a slow breath, shivering. “*Contract of consent to physical and sexual activity between Bane Antonov and Dove Marchetti*.”

Heat pools low in my core as I slowly lift my eyes to his. “Bane—”

“Keep going.”

“*The undersigned agrees to be a willing and active participant*—” I stop, shaking my head. “There’s no fucking way this is legal.”

“Read it.”

I glare at him, then back at the page.

“—*In the following activities. Vaginal, oral, and anal*—no, I’m not—”

“There’s more.”

I bare my teeth at him. “I’m aware of that.” My eyes drop back to the page. “*Kinks including consensual non-consent…*”

I start to raise my head, but he shakes his. “Don’t make yourself look foolish and pretend you don’t know what that means,” he say. “Or do I need you to go back over your *extensive* internet porn viewing history?”

“Asshole,” I mutter. “*D/s dynamics, either part- or full-time. Impact play…*”

My cheeks heat.

“*Somnophilic activities—*”

“It means I’ll fuck you or do whatever else I want to you while you sleep. But you knew that. Keep going.”

“*Bondage. Orgasm denial…*” My face throbs. “*Free use*.”

I look up at him. Bane exhales slowly as he continues to pace around me.

“This marriage doesn't just mean that my family will get access to your father’s shipping port.” He nods his chin at the folder trembling in my hands. “It also means you’re going to be *mine*, in every sense of the word.”

I start to open my mouth. But suddenly, I’m jolting as he cups my jaw, then deftly pushes two fingers over my bottom lip, holding my jaw open as he shakes his head.

“Uh-uh, little bird,” he murmurs.

I shiver, something dark and sinful coiling in my core as he pushes his fingers into my mouth, sliding them over my tongue.

“I know *all* your secrets. All the deviant, dark, dirty little things that you crave.” His fingers are still in my mouth, keeping my jaw open as he stabs his smoky dark eyes right into mine. “And after you’ve read that list? I bet if I reached between your legs right now I'd find you nice and wet, wouldn’t I?”

I spit his fingers out of my mouth.

“Just *try* to put your hands between my legs and see what happens,” I hiss.

Bane chuckles as he resumes his pacing. “Oh, I’m not going to play that game with you. Not today. But when you’re my wife—”

“That isn’t happ—*OW!*”

Before I can even get the word out, he’s lifted the back of my skirt and brought his hand smacking *hard* against my bare ass with a loud *CRACK*.

“What the *fuck*?!” I jolt, half-whirling toward him even as he continues his slow, languid walk around me. “Are you fucking *kidding*?! You can’t just—”

“Interrupt me again,” he murmurs, “and the next time will be over my knee, with that charming goth barbie skirt pulled up over your ass.”

My eyes bulge wide.

“*When* you’re my wife,” Bane growls, “I’ll be putting my hands on you however I see fit. *Whenever* I see fit.”

I shiver, gasping quietly when his lips brush my earlobe from behind.

“Remember; I know *all* the dirty things you like.”

I cringe, my face throbbing.

“Oh, don’t be embarrassed,” he murmurs into my ear as he continues his walk. “*I’m into them, too*. Would you like to find out now?”

“*Pass*,” I sneer.

He shrugs. “You can go ahead and sign that contract now.”

“I’m not signing anything.”

Bane levels a cold look at me. “Oh, you are. And I think you want to.”

He moves right into my personal space, looming over me as his eyes stab into mine. He lowers his mouth, and I bite back a gasp when his lips brush my ear.

“As much as you want to hate me for it, it *excites you*, little bird,” he murmurs right into my ear, sending a ripple up my spine as it snaps rigid. “Knowing I’m going to *fuck* you; hard, brutally, without mercy. And we both know you’re going to be begging me for more.”

I laugh coldly. “I highly doubt that.”

Joke's on him: I don’t come.

Ever.

That doesn’t mean I don’t try, of course. See also: my internet history. It doesn’t mean I can’t feel pleasure. But I can’t reach orgasm, never have.

But something tells me this isn’t an issue that Bane is going to remotely concern himself with.

He steps back and leans against the front edge of his desk, his arms folded across his chest. My heart thuds, my skin tingling as his eyes lance into me.

“Are you doing this because I look like her?” I say quietly.

Bane’s eyes narrow. “That would be sick,” he growls.

“Your words.”

Our gazes clash again. I look for the truth in his eyes. But if there’s anything there at all, it’s lost, swirled together with the malevolence and venom.

Bane holds out a pen.

“What if I don’t?” I croak. “Sign, that is?”

He lifts a shoulder. “Then I’d get ready to have some very uncomfortable conversations with just about everyone who thought they knew you.”

Tears bead in the corners of my eyes as I look away.

“You’re a bastard.”

“And *you* took away the woman I loved,” he spits. “You’ll forgive me if I don’t think we’re even *a little bit* even. Sign the fucking contract.”

I could hem and haw. I could make more of a stink. I could hit him, or scream, or cause a scene.

But in the end, I know it's useless.

Wordlessly, I grab the pen from his hand and sign on the dotted line. Then I fling the whole folder at him, pure fury on my face.

Bane exhales slowly, glancing at the contract and then closing the folder. Wordlessly, he walks back around to the far side of the desk and sits in his chair.

“It’s time to start.”

I blink quickly. “W-what?”

Bane leans back in his chair. “Strip.”

I stare at him, wide-eyed. “*Excuse*—”

“Do you or do you not understand what you just signed.”

My mouth purses. “*I do*.”

“Good, there’s no confusion. Now, take your clothes off, or I’ll do it for you.”

My body clenches. A war rages inside me: the rebelling, riotous, furious part of me battling the traitorous, toxic, cancerous part of me that feels fucking *warm* when his cold gaze lands on me.

“This is fucked up and sick,” I hiss.

“Duly noted.”

My eyes lock on his.

Fuck him. He won’t get the better of me. Seeing my body doesn’t mean he owns me. And if he wants to cage me in with him, too bad. Because he won’t be caging *me* in with *him*. He’ll be caging *himself* in with *me*.

And I’ll make sure it’s his fucking funeral.

“Fine,” I say, shrugging.

I reach for the zipper of my hoodie, tugging it down and shrugging it off. The skirt is next.

No seductive smiles. No coy winks.

He only gets clinical, detached undressing.

He’s going to regret every fucking second of this.

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8

BANE

IT'S TRULY EERIE how similar they always looked.

The perky-goth/death metal Barbie aesthetic aside, the woman standing in front of me looks *so* much like Lark.

It pisses me the fuck off even more.

Like a visceral reminder of what I lost.

Most people have a distorted view of what it means to be "mafia royalty". Social media and mafia-slanted paparazzi shit like The Scarface Report, the TikTok account that's been blasting our Empire State Building photoshoot nonstop, tend to glamorize it. Yes, as adults, my friends and I—Carmine, Nico, Nero, Roman, and Laz—do have a way of roaming this city like kings.

But it wasn't always like that.

In middle school, it was hell.

At least, it was if you were me.

I'm not the only one of my friends who went to private school. With the fathers we had, and the power they held? Of course we did. But while Carmine, Nico, and Nero as good Catholic boys went to St. Thomas Aquinas, and Roman and Laz ended up at the Pembroke School, Dad thought I'd be best suited to Thornfield Academy.

Not, obviously, because there was *anyone* else there like me—heir to a criminal empire but also wrestling with what would later be diagnosed as clinical depression—but because my test scores were through the fucking roof.

I think he thought I'd thrive there, with my over-achieving brain. Plus, I think maybe he wanted me to learn outside the echo chamber of mafia-centered private education.

There, I learned for the first time what it meant to be *without* power.

On the outside, looking in.

An outcast.

I wasn't feared or lionized for my last name at Thornfield. I was shunned. Mocked. Bullied by my preppy, old-money, WASPy peers. For being "a criminal". For the black clothes I usually wore. For the "snake bite" double lip piercing, and the metal bands whose logos I'd draw on the backs of my hands in sharpie.

Don't get me wrong, I could handle it. But it was a battle every fucking day. Me against the world. Always with my fists up and my lips bloodied.

Until I met Lark Peltier.

The other outcast. The one other soul at Thornfield who clearly did not belong there. I was there because my father was a notorious gangster with a lot of money to throw at fearful admissions boards. She was there because her grandmother, who had raised her, worked for Don Cesare Marchetti, whose oldest daughter, Dove, was already a student.

Dove somehow *entirely* skipped the part where all the other shitheads at school bullied you for being mafia. Probably because she managed to integrate into the upper-class closed-door club of the elite. She partied with them. Dated them. Blended in.

But not me, and not Lark.

I suppose our meeting was inevitable, like celestial bodies caught in an orbit. The two weirdos.

The first time we met, she caught me smoking and asked to bum one.

She sat with me, and we talked.

It wasn’t forced. It wasn’t awkward. It was the most natural conversation I’d ever had.

She told me how her grandmother was the housekeeper for the Marchetti family, and how they had generously paid her tuition to Thornfield, too, since she and the ice queen herself, Dove, were besties.

I always found that funny: the two birds, Dove and Lark, being friends, despite also being complete opposites.

Dove was all about cocaine with the cool kids, designer clothes and snobby attitude, and don't forget Scott, the quarterback boyfriend.

Lark was like me: anti-everything. Wearing as much black as the school’s dress code would let her get away with. Metal music on her headphones. Darkness lurking under the surface.

She was my best friend that year.

My only friend.

It’s not like she fixed everything. The next day was the same shit, different day. But things *were* different . I had Lark. Someone to make the day-to-day existence in that snobby shit-hole bearable.

Until she went out one night, crossed paths with the wrong piece of shit, and got herself killed.

For years, I was so fucking angry that Lorenzo Cielo was killed the night the Marchetti men crashed into that house where he had Dove and Lark, after he’d taken them from the club they’d snuck into, two nights before.

So. Fucking. Angry.

Because that motherfucker wasn’t the only one who never walked out of that apartment alive.

Lark didn’t, either.

For ages, I felt cheated that I didn’t have a responsible party I could punish for that night.

But then I realized I did.

Dove instigated that entire night. She talked Lark into going out and using their fake IDs to get into that club. Lark didn’t party. She didn’t drink. She didn’t go looking for trouble. *Dove* did.

But it wasn’t Dove who paid the price that night.

It was Lark.

Lark, who started as my friend, turned into the girl I loved—even when she had her dark moods—and then morphed again into the girl I was going to marry.

She died, and Dove walked away without a fucking scratch.

The two of us are in this room right now because of the sins of the past. And now, she’s going to atone for those sins.

I watch with an eyebrow cocked as she deftly takes off her clothes. This isn’t about being sexy, *obviously*. She might as well be loading a dishwasher. And I get that she’s used to changing in front of people, because of ballet. But that's not why she’s so nonchalant about it right now.

She’s doing it to thumb her nose at me. She thinks if she doesn't cry, that's sticking it to me.

Would I prefer some tears? Maybe.

Those’ll come later.

She faces me, her chin set, her head held defiantly as she stands there in just her underwear—a plain, black thong and an even more utilitarian gray bra.

All the same, my jaw tightens.

Whatever anger I feel for her doesn’t change the fact that she’s *stunning*. She was always gorgeous, and the hard partying, addiction, and rehab over the last few years haven’t done *shit* to change that.

Being a professional dancer training hundreds of hours a week doesn’t exactly hurt, either.

I let my eyes drag over her tight, toned body. The athletic arms and feminine shoulders. The soft rise of her breasts, her nipples tightening visibly through the plain gray bra. The toned stomach and slim but rounded hips, tapering down into long, runway model legs.

My dick twitches in my pants despite my efforts to stop it.

I can’t help it when looking at a woman that stunning.

It's just biology.

Silence blankets the room as my gaze slides over her curves. Her soft skin, now with a smattering of delicate tattoos on her arm, wrist and hip. The pink and blonde hair. The ruined dancer's feet which give her unexpected character.

I smile coldly. All her emo-goth manic-pixie-dream girl armor is doing *shit* to deter me.

I lift my eyes to hers. “I did mean *all* your clothes.”

She glares at me. “Pig.”

I shrug. “*Oink oink*.” My eyes narrow. “Seriously, lose the rest.”

I watch smugly as she unhooks her bra and lets it fall to the floor, her eyes avoiding mine. I stare at her body openly as she bares it to me, my eyes lingering on the slope of her small tits. Her rosy-pink nipples as they tighten in the air.

The panties drop to her ankles before she deftly steps out of them. Then she just stands there, arms at her sides, a grim expression on her face as she stares fixedly at the wall behind me.

I’m amused that she doesn’t try to cover herself, even though I know this is also part of her trying to “stick it” to me.

My gaze slides down her toned stomach and between her soft thighs to the pink slit of her pussy.

Clean shaven. Though, there's a slight dusting of stubble, which amuses me. It means she likes to keep it shaved, but she wasn't expecting to *need* it shaved when she came here tonight.

She notices where my eyes land, and I don't miss the haughty little smirk on her face. But when my gaze shifts to the thin, evenly spaced white scar lines across her upper thigh near her hip, the smirk fades. For the first time since she took her clothes off, she tries to cover part of herself. Her palm slides across her hip, but my voice stops her.

"Hands to your sides."

She shoots me a look, her mouth opening and then closing, then her hovering hand retreats to her side, and she holds her head high again, meeting my gaze without flinching, glaring right at me.

"Well, you've made it abundantly clear what you expect from this."

Before I can even blink she's turning to the side and bending over the chair across the desk from me, her elbows on the armrest, her muscled back slightly arched, her head down, a cold, stormy expression on her face.

"Just fucking do it already so we can get it over with."

The room is quiet for a moment. My lips curl darkly at the corners as I stand from my chair and slowly—*slowly*—make my way around the side of my desk, until I'm looking right at her tight ass.

On the one hand, I'm staring at her soft, pink pussy framed by her creamy thighs, and my cock starts to swell.

Again, it's just biology.

But on the other hand, this is *not* how I want her. I want her *begging* me when I do—either to do it, or not. This unfussed "get it over with" attitude throws me and pisses me right the fuck off.

I chuckle. Her face heats as she turns her head to the side, glaring back at me.

"*What* is so funny," she grits out icily.

“The fact that you think this is a one-time thing,” I purr. “That I fuck you bent over a chair in my library once and…we’re good?”

Her back ripples as a shiver flies down her spine.

“*How many times*,” she hisses.

Slowly, my amusement turns bitter.

I hate the way she’s so readily bent over like this, so detached in her apathetic acceptance of the situation. Like she hates it, but she’s going to grit her teeth, take it, and that will be that.

It feels like this isn’t new to her. Like she’s *used* to doing things like this for men like…well, me.

It's oddly infuriating, given our history.

“As many fucking times as I want,” I growl. “Now reach back, grab your ass cheeks and spread them wide open.”

I hadn’t planned this part. But I feel I need to punish her right now.

She grits her teeth, twisting her head to glare at me. Then her mouth draws to a line and she looks away from me again. She keeps her chest against the padded arm of the chair as she reaches back and splays her fingers across both cheeks.

Yes, my eyes lock on the delicate pink lips of her pussy when she spreads them open. But not for my amusement or enjoyment. It’s to humiliate her.

…That said, I *do* enjoy it anyway.

I let her stand there for another solid minute, bent over, her cheeks throbbing as she lewdly spreads her holes wide for me. Then I walk back to my chair and sit.

“Stand up,” I command.

She drops her hands and straightens, turning to let her smoldering, furious gaze stab into me, her fists clenched at her sides.

“Well?” she mutters.

I draw in a slow breath. “How many men have you been with.”

She blinks and then stares at me. “Excuse me?”

“It’s a pretty straightforward question.”

Her lips twist. “How many girls have *you* fucked?”

“I have no idea.”

She rolls her eyes. “Fine, same.”

My jaw grinds. “How. *Many*.”

Her eyes rip back mine, narrowing. “Some,” she hisses. “Several. A few. I honestly don’t know.”

Darkness coils inside me.

“I won’t put you over my knee and spank you, because I’ve seen what you watch online and I know that would just make you come all over my thighs, dirty little masochist that you are.”

Her cheeks flame. “*Fuck you—*”

“But there are other, *far* less enjoyable ways for me to punish you. So enough with the lip and the bullshit and answer the question.” I lean over the desk, my eyes locked on hers. “How many fucking men.”

Her throat works. Her lips sneer slightly.

“I don't know. Dozens,” she throws back. “Next question.”

The dark thing inside me snaps its teeth and claws at the underside of my skin. I lock eyes with hers, looking for the lie.

But she’s just a blank slate staring back.

“Since I’ve seen your porn history—”

“You mean when you violated my privacy for your sick mind games?” she snaps back.

I shrug. “All's fair in love—”

“We are *not* in love,” she hisses, her eyes narrowed as the words spit from her thinned mouth.

“…and *war*,” I finish. I smile coldly. “Surely one of those two fits our current situation. Now, *since* I’ve seen what makes you wet—”

“Asshole.”

“Oh, believe me, I’m holding back,” I growl, relishing the way her eyes widen a little. “Now, tell me what it is about a loss of control that gets you off.”

Her cheeks flush darkly.

“I don’t *get off* on the loss of—”

“Would it jog your memory if I read out the titles of the videos you’ve watched the most in the last month?”

When she bristles, I chuckle darkly.

“Sorry—I forgot that all things memory are a sore subject for you.”

Her eyes glint sharply. “No, you didn’t.”

“No, I didn’t. Now, answer the question. Truthfully.”

She swallows heavily. “Pass.”

I smile coldly. “It would be in your best interests to tell me, or I’ll just take away that control right here and now and find out myself.”

She flushes again before she quickly looks down. “I—”

“Eyes on me.”

There’s a fire in her eyes when she quickly looks back up. Our gazes lock, and I focus a little *too* much on the way her lower lip drops just a bit.

…Maybe because I’m imagining that parted lip sliding down the underside of my swollen cock as she takes me deep into the back of her throat.

“I…don’t know,” she murmurs.

I pick the folder up off the desk and open it to the blanket consent form she signed.

The one in which she consented to no longer having to *give* consent.

Fuck, does that make me hard.

“Let’s take another look at your particular kinks,” I muse, smirking as I drag my gaze over the page. “Consensual non-consent, D/s dynamics, impact play, somnophilic activities, bondage, orgasm denial…” I bite back a groan. “*Free use*.”

When I look up, her face is bright pink and her eyes are staring at the floor.

“Eyes. On. *Me*.”

She shivers, her nipples tightening as her gaze snaps back to mine.

“I’m guessing your pussy would turn into a dripping mess if I were to pin you down with my hand around your throat, your wrists bound behind your back, and use your slutty little holes with or without your say-so, wouldn’t it?”

Her eyes bulge. The flush creeps down between her tits and over her stomach, all the way to her thighs.

I smile devilishly. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

“*Fuckhead—*”

“Come here.”

I rap the words out as I stand and walk around to the front of my desk.

She stares at me for a second. But then, her eyes avoiding mine, she quietly advances to me. She sucks in a breath when I drop to my haunches in front of her, my eyes staring darkly at the thin, white, even scars on her thigh.

“That isn’t allowed anymore.”

She snorts. “Okay.”

“It’s *not*,” I snarl.

Her eyes roll. “Or what?”

She gasps sharply as I abruptly stand, looming right over her, my chest almost touching hers.

“Do you really want to *die*, little bird?” I growl, right in her face.

She juts out her chin, her eyes warring with mine. “Do *you*?” she tosses back. “You seemed quite interested in that ledge up—”

Her words catch along with her breath and a choked, whimpered sound hums in her throat as my hand wraps around it.

“That. Isn’t. *Allowed*,” I growl through clenched teeth. “No more cutting. No more trying to kill yourself. Do I make myself perfectly clear?”

She lifts her chin defiantly again, eyes locked with mine.

“*Fine*.”

Fuck, I’m going to enjoy fucking that sass out of that mouth.

“Arms up.”

She looks confused but does it anyway, watching me curiously as my gaze slides over her armpits, then up the inside of each arm.

“Spread your fingers.”

Her brows knit. “What the fuck are you…”

I smile coldly when understanding hits her face.

Track marks.

She narrows her eyes at me.

“*Fuck you*,” she spits.

“Not until I know I don’t need to be worried about hepatitis. Thanks anyway.”

“You know I don't have *shit*,” she grits through clenched teeth. “You made me submit to that fucking STD check.”

I grin. “Yes, how was that, anyway?”

“Horrible. Invasive.”

“*Good*.”

I step away from her and jam my fingertip down on the edge of my desk.

“Sit,” I command.

She stares at me for a second. Then, not looking at me, she quietly walks past me, turns, and leans against the edge of the desk.

“*On it*,” I growl.

Her muscles flex as she uses her hands to hoist herself up and plant her firm ass on the edge of the desk. She gasps quietly as I drop to one knee. I wrap my hand around her ankle and place her foot firmly on my raised knee.

There’s no reason for me to do this. I *know* she’s a former addict. I’ve read her file, and I know her preferred injection sites were her feet, since dancers' feet are already so fucked up that no one would ever notice track marks there.

But I need to see with my own eyes. I don’t know why, but I do.

And that’s exactly where I find them: little scars over slightly raised and damaged veins in her feet and between her toes.

“Spread your legs.”

Her eyes snap to mine.

“Now.”

Her mouth thins. “Fine.”

“Not 'fine'. *Yes, sir*,” I growl.

“Excuse me?”

“Yes, sir.”

She glares at me. “You’re a fucking sadist.”

“Indeed. Now say it.”

She shivers and clears her throat. “Yes, *sir*,” she mutters.

She spreads her legs. I’m still down on one knee between them as I lean close, my gaze sliding up her inner thighs, looking for more track marks that might not have been mentioned in her file.

I don’t find any. But I stay where I am, staring at the pink lips of her cunt.

“*Now* what the fuck are you doing,” she grumbles, her face red.

“Looking at your pussy.”

Her eyes widen, her throat working up and down. “Are you…” She looks away. “Are you going to do something to me or not?”

“Right now?” I smile wolfishly as I stand. “Of course not.”

Her brow knits. “Why not?”

“Eager little thing, aren’t you.”

She glares death at me. “I’m not *eager*. I just want to get it fucking over with. I’m curious why you’re not—”

She gasps sharply as I move right between her spread legs and firmly cup her bare pussy in my hand. She lets out a choked whimper, her thighs closing. All it does is trap my fingers against her silky heat.

My mouth drops to her ear, and I relish the strangled mewl that comes from her throat as I slowly drag a finger up her seam.

“Because you and I both know you just don’t find it fun unless there’s an element of *force* involved,” I purr into her ear. “Isn't that right, little bird?”

I tease my finger up and down her pussy again.

She’s wet. Not very, but a little. And I grin to myself, because I bet she *hates* that she is.

I pull my hand away and abruptly move from between her legs. She slides off the edge of the desk as I walk back around to sit in my chair.

“I’ll email you a copy of our agreement for your records. But to preemptively answer your question—yes, you can expect all the activities mentioned in it.”

She’s standing in front of the desk now, her arms folded over her tits.

“And when are these *activities* expected to occur?” she mumbles.

“At any time.”

“What if I’m not here?”

I lift my eyes to hers. “You’ll always be here,” I grin lecherously at her. “We’re getting married, in case that part hasn’t really clicked yet. So you’ll live here now. Think of the optics.”

Her eyes flash. “You mean after the wedding—”

“I mean you’re moving in today.”

She stiffens, but then an overly sweet smile spreads over her lips as her eyes stab into me like knives.

“I’m not sure if you knew this, but my father is *very* religious.” She exhales, shaking her head. “If I mentioned moving in with my fiancé *before* we were married in the eyes of God, well, Daddy wouldn’t like that much. I mean…” She smirks lethally at me. “*Think of the optics*.”

I eye her coolly.

Well played, little bird.

“As such,” she says smugly, “I’ll be staying in my own place.”

“Suit yourself,” I growl. “But when you *are* mine, you’ll be fucking *mine*. In every goddamn sense of the word.”

She bristles, glaring at me for a long few seconds before she shivers slightly.

“Why are you doing this?” she finally says, her voice softening a little, almost pleading. “I mean, seriously, *why*—”

“Because seven years ago, someone was taken from me,” I snap, so brutally as to make her flinch.

Her lip trembles as she stares haggardly at me. “So…I’m, what, a replacement? Because I look like her?! Because she was my friend?! Because—”

“Because I fucking *can*,” I growl. “Now get dressed and get out.”

She stares at me, blinking rapidly. Then she turns and quickly pulls her clothes back on.

When she’s done, she glances once at me, then walks to the doors. Her hand is on one of the knobs when she twists to look back at me, her brows knitting.

“When…” She frowns. “When will it start?” she asks quietly. “I mean…” She nods with her chin at the contract in front of me. “You know.”

“You mean when will I *fuck* you?” I growl. “When will I claim you, and toy with you, and control you?”

Her face heats as she nods. “*Y-yeah*,” she chokes.

I smile.

“When you least expect it, baby.”

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9

DOVE

Consensual non-consent.

Impact play. Bondage. Orgasm denial.

A heated, shuddering sensation traces down my spine.

Somnophilic activities.

Free use.

My throat bobs as my eyes dart all over the laptop screen in front of me. As promised, a copy of our signed agreement was waiting in my inbox when I got home from Bane's place thirty minutes ago.

“Home” for me, though, isn’t the main house, where Dad and Medusa—sorry, *Felicity*—live. When I returned from *Il Refugio*, the ultra-exclusive “wellness facility”…aka rehab clinic…situated on the edge of Lake Como in northern Italy, I couldn’t bring myself to live under the same roof as Dad and that cunt.

But the Brooklyn Heights mansion is over a hundred years old, which means it also has an old carriage house.

This is where I set up my home base. It’s nice and open, which gives me plenty of space for the barre, just in case I decide the eleven million hours I spend dancing at the Mercury Theater isn’t enough.

There’s also a ton of room for my paintings, a little sitting area, a small kitchen, and a full bathroom, along with a lofted sleeping area.

I like it. It’s quiet, and everyone—mostly—leaves me alone.

At the café table I’ve got set up in the kitchen area, I re-read the devil’s deal I’ve just signed. Each time I get to the list of kinks included in the “contract of consent to physical and sexual activity”, heat floods my face. But the most mortifying, fucked-up part isn’t the list of kinks I’ve just agreed to participate in.

It’s that they’re all things that *do* turn me on.

Like, a lot.

I can guess where that came from. I don’t know—don’t remember—if I gravitated toward being restrained, having my control taken away, free use, or even worse, rape-play, *before* Lark and I were taken.

Taken, and held for two nights by that fucking psychopath.

I…might have been, I guess? But everything I’ve learned about who I was before that experience suggests otherwise.

I don’t love the me I am now. But I’m pretty sure I’d *hate* the me I was before my trip to hell. Back when I was Dove the head cheerleader, queen bitch of Thornfield Prep, dating Scott Hathaway, the chest-thumping neanderthal quarterback, and breezing through the world like a spoiled little mafia cunt.

But meeting the devil face to face changes you.

So, *maybe* I was into the idea of being ravaged and fucked against my will back then, or being someone’s toy, whenever and wherever they choose. Being used while I’m asleep.

But I think the surer bet is that those fucked-up needs and desires were implanted in me while I was in that room.

I’ve read *a lot* about the psychological effects of torture, imprisonment, and extreme stress. And when I replay those hellish, nightmare flashbacks of

being chained up, my head bleeding after that monster shaved it raw, and hearing what I couldn't block out happening in the room next to mine?

My eyes squeeze shut as my body violently shudders. My brain short-circuits briefly, bright lights like a mini lightning storm exploding through my front cortex and making me wince as my hand flies to my temple.

For a second, I'm back there in that rotting house.

Chained to the cot.

Dirty, cold, hungry, and terrified.

Listening to that monster rape and finally murder my best friend in the room next door. Her muffled, gagged screams. The sound of flesh slapping flesh.

I bolt from the kitchen, stumbling into the bathroom and lifting the toilet lid just in time to vomit.

The lightning storm in my head subsides a little then. I sink to the floor, breathing in and out unsteadily as I rest the back of my head against the tiled wall. My hair falls over my clammy face, but I don't brush it away, looking up at the ceiling through a haze of blonde and pink.

My hair's been almost every color of the rainbow over the past seven years. Sometimes buzzed super short. Sometimes extra-long. The therapist I saw for a while at Oxford Hills Academy, over in England, told me my ever-changing hairstyle was a coping mechanism; a way to "take back control and autonomy over my body" after that psychopath shaved my head bald when he took us.

I mean, *no shit*, *Sherlock*.

Eventually I exhale and push the hair out of my eyes. Then I flush the toilet, stand, wash my hands, and splash cold water on my face.

I grab my laptop off the kitchen table and bring it upstairs to the sleeping loft with me. For a moment, after I undress, I glance at the reflection of my body in the full-length wall mirror.

The old me was obsessed with unrealistic beauty standards and the male gaze.

Since my trip to hell, I have a different outlook.

I mean, I know I'm pretty, even if the circles under my eyes are a little deeper these days. I'm in—real talk—*insanely* good shape, thanks to a lifetime of ballet.

But while I don't remember much from before the amnesia, I do remember *hating* any and every little blemish I'd find on my body. A pimple was cause for a meltdown. A bruise from dancing? Kill me now. End my suffering.

A wry smile curls my mouth as I look at myself.

I'm in ludicrously good shape. I'm toned, slender, strong…and yes, pretty.

But my body is also a *battle report* of what it's been through. Recent bruising from a fall at rehearsal purples the outside of my left thigh all the way up to the hip. Another one from a different tumble…Val and I *really* need to get that lift sorted out…swells on my right forearm.

The thin white lines, evenly spaced and all the same length across my thigh where it meets my hip.

I don't cut much anymore. Hardly ever, really. But there was a time…

I shake my head, letting that part of me fall back into the shadows as I take stock of the rest of my wounds and marks that the old me would have crashed out to see.

The scar on my knee from the patellar impingement surgery I had when I was nineteen. The ones on my elbow, from when I was high as a kite and fell sideways through a plate glass door.

The burn marks on my back, one of my shoulders and my right hand, from the fire and explosion that knocked away my memory the night I was rescued.

Tattoos—some still beloved, others that make me cringe. Scars from other accidents. My fucked-up feet and the hidden track marks there.

I smile quietly, turning, really looking at my body without trying for the best angle or the most flattering light.

Everything might be spiraling out of control right now, but at least I don’t hate myself like I used to. I might not *like* myself all the time, but I’ve learned to put away the hate.

Mostly.

And that’s something to be proud of. That took fucking *work*, and time, and tears, and falling over and over before I could stand on my own again.

I frown a little, thinking about my time at OHA, and then at the slightly less prestigious Manchester Prep after I was “encouraged to leave” the former.

Suddenly being an outcast.

Trying to remember who I was, hoping the memories would come back. Screaming in terror when they did.

I think—no, I *know*—that’s why I tried heroin that first time, at Oxford Hills University. Those memories, returning after being lost in the ether, were a literal walking nightmare from which I couldn't wake. And once they did come back, nothing could keep them away.

Nothing except heroin.

It's ludicrous, I know: an aspiring ballet dancer doing *heroin*? But shooting up was the warmest hug I’d ever felt. The great escape from the monsters rampaging through my head. Better than any high, any emotion, any elation.

But heroin is a heaven that rapidly turns into a hell. Your salvation becomes your prison—bars that lock you down as you watch yourself lose your entire life.

Friends. Family. Your pride. Your dignity. Your interest in doing anything but *more fucking heroin*.

I slowly inhale, forcing myself to look at myself.

Most people don’t make it back from that trip to the dark side.

I did.

I survived. I *lived*. Fate whispered that I could not withstand the storm, and I shouted back that I *am* the goddamn storm.

So this shit with Bane?

I grimace.

Let him do whatever he wants. It won't break me. Whatever he's got up his sleeve… I've survived worse.

I shower in the upstairs bathroom off my sleeping area. Then I pull on some cozy sleep shorts and a hoodie and sit cross-legged on my bed. I open the laptop, reading the list of kinks again, my face growing hotter.

I know there's a strong possibility that I get turned on by fucked-up stuff like rape fantasies, or being tied down with my control taken away, or a free use kink—which, yes, is exactly what it sounds like—because of what I lived through back in that room.

I know that ordeal probably rewired me. Rearranged "things that are bad" and "things that I want" in my head.

I *know* this. It doesn't change the fact that I *do* get turned on by this shit.

A lot.

I close the laptop, turn off the lights, and sink back against the pillows.

And my sick, twisted brain comes awake.

My mind replays the mix of shame and pure arousal I felt when he made me bend over and spread myself open to his gaze. I shiver at the memory of his lips brushing my ear, and his deep rasping voice purring against my neck.

The feel of his big hand on me, cupping my fucking pussy…

Desire bubbles and ripples under my skin. My thighs squeeze together, and —God help me—I feel the seep of wet heat pooling in my core.

My breath hitches as I slide my hands over my body to my breasts, the fingers of one hand finding a pebbled nipple under the cotton. I pinch it

hard, biting back a sharp gasp as pain and pleasure erupt inside me. I pinch again, twisting the aching nipple as I squeeze my thighs tight together and roll my hips.

I know. I'm a fucked-up disaster.

So fucking what.

My hand slides lower, pulling up the hem of my hoodie. My fingers tease across my stomach, pushing lower until they slip into my shorts and beneath the lacy edge of my panties.

I'm…wet. Embarrassingly so.

So wet that my panties are fucking soaked. My eyes drift closed, my breath catching as I toy with my nipple and push two fingers through my silky wet lips. I moan softly as I roll them over my swollen clit, my hips rocking as I grind against my fingers, thinking of—

Abruptly, like I've just had cold water dumped over me, I jerk my hand back out of my shorts.

A harsh, sobering thought slams into me as I smash my hands down onto the bed.

Shoot me now. I was about to start fantasizing about *Bane*.

And I don't care how much of a train wreck I am, I'm not *that* bad.

I exhale harshly, kicking back the covers to slide under them. I tug the duvet up to my chin, my heart still hammering in my chest as I try to slow my breathing.

Get it the fuck together.

I scowl up at the ceiling as my current reality presses down on me.

I'm marrying *Bane*.

I'm going to be sleeping with him. He's made that clear.

Guilt slithers through me.

I mean, him being a moody, controlling asshat aside, he was *Lark's fiancé*. That he would even *want* to sleep with me is…fucked.

I make a face in the darkness.

For fuck's sake, Lark and I were more than just friends. We were like sisters.

It's verging on Biblical.

I blow air through my lips and let myself sink back into the sheets. My eyes close and I exhale again, trying to let the pressure of everything melt away.

A sudden crash downstairs rips my eyes *wide* open. I sit bolt upright in bed, my heart hammering in my chest.

What the *fuck* was that.

There's a rustling sound, like someone rummaging. My throat tightens, the hairs on the nape of my neck standing straight up as a chill whisks its way down my back. I glance at the side table, looking for my phone, then I remember.

It's downstairs, on the kitchen table.

I mean, I have my laptop with me, but what am I going to do, *email* for help?

The sound comes again, footsteps. My head whips to the side, and I tense when my eyes land on the wooden rolling bar leaning in the corner.

I use the smooth, vaguely baseball-bat length cylindrical piece of wood to work out muscle knots.

It's no gun, but it's better than nothing.

I slowly and quietly slip my legs out from under the covers and stand. I tiptoe silently over to the rolling bar, wrap my fingers around it, and then brandish it like a club as I turn to the stairs down to the lower level.

More rustling downstairs.

My pulse skips. Adrenaline courses through me like hot mercury.

I take the stairs as quietly as I can, tiptoeing down with the rolling bar raised. I just need to reach my phone—or, if I can't, I need to make it to the door.

Clammy wetness breaks out across my back. My hands tighten around the smooth length of wood, comforting in my grip, as I reach the ground floor. I turn quietly, heart pounding, eyes stabbing into the darkness.

The man comes out of nowhere.

With a scream, I whirl, yanking the wood back and swinging it as hard as I can toward him. He dodges it, whooshing past me like smoke as I spin. He charges again, and another bloodcurdling scream erupts from my throat as I take aim again at his head, as hard as I fucking can.

Glass explodes everywhere when the momentum of my home run attempt yanks me off my feet and I go slamming into the upended side table, toppling over it. I crash to the ground, crying out in pain when my hand hits shards of broken lamp. I whirl, heedless of the blood, a yell on my lips, brandishing the wood again.

The carriage house is still, and utterly quiet.

There's no attacker.

No intruder.

No threat.

My pulse is still racing as I get up off the crunchy, glass-strewn floor. I bolt over to the wall and throw on every light switch I can reach.

There's nothing and *nobody* here.

I swallow shakily, my eyes scanning the space. Quickly, I go to the front door.

It's locked. From the inside.

The back door is the same, and none of the windows is smashed in. I already know the answer, but I check upstairs too, anyway—hoping I'll find

a broken window, or a hole in the ceiling. Anything to prove that I'm not crazy.

But of course, I find zero signs of forced entry.

Quietly, my pulse back to normal, I clean and bandage the small cuts on my hand. I vacuum up the shards from the lamp I murdered and pull the side table back onto four legs before sliding it back into place next to the couch.

The addict in me *screams* for something to take all this away. But I know now that not even heroin can get rid of the thing that's in me.

The broken thing. The tangled, easily confused thing.

Which is just a kinder way of reminding myself that *I'm fucking crazy*.

Like, actually.

They tell me that I've been on my array of daily psych meds since I was a kid. But I know the doses all increased after my ordeal.

Most of the time, they help.

Sometimes—like tonight—they don't.

There was no intruder. No attacker. No danger.

The only enemy here is *me*.

I smile wryly as I shut all the lights off and head back upstairs. In my bathroom, I open the medicine cabinet and let my eyes run over the familiar lineup inside.

Lithium, for my bipolar disorder. Risperidone, a mood stabilizer. Zoloft, an antidepressant. Lorazepam to counter panic attacks, or to help with sleep. Lexapro and Buspirone for anxiety.

I end up taking a lorazepam and twenty milligrams of melatonin so I can conk out. Then I crawl back into bed.

Sullen. Subdued. Quiet.

Joke's on you, motherfucker, I think to myself, picturing Bane’s obnoxiously attractive face. *You have no idea what kind of crazy you just chained yourself to*.

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10

DOVE

AT FIRST, I dream of the room.

I feel the metal clamp around my ankle, the stinging razor burn on my scalp. I smell my own urine and the stench of rotting wood coming from the moldy walls.

I hear the muffled, gagged sobs of my friend in the next room, and the rhythmic thrusts of our captor as he ruts into her.

I taste my tears, mixed with the bile rising in my throat as the scream I don't have the strength to release dies in my mouth.

This isn't a rare nightmare. I have it all the fucking time.

But I'm numb to it at this point: no longer a terrified victim, just an apathetic observer. Like I'm watching a horror movie that I've seen a thousand times.

I *know* the monster is behind the door. I *know* who dies first.

I know how it ends.

It ends with my father's men kicking in the door, too late. Lark is already dead. The madman who's kept us here has also been cooking meth in the bathroom, and one of my father's men's bullets has ignited the chemicals..

The fire is consuming the building, about to bring the roof down on my head just as the Marchetti soldiers shoot the monster.

Slowly, like morning mist evaporating from a frozen lawn, the dream melts away and another one takes its place.

I'm used to one nightmare rolling into another. Sometimes, after I revisit that house of horrors, I get to live the first few days of heroin detox all over again. Or psychotherapy, relaying my trauma to strangers who study me like a monkey in a zoo. Or any number of hellish nights I stumbled my way through—strung out, drowning in my survivor's guilt.

All while trying to remember who the fuck I am.

But this time, the next dream is different. There's no nightmare. No trauma. No doctors or needles or hating myself while I load my next hit.

This time, it's warm and sensual, sending ripples of heated electricity sizzling across my skin and heat pooling between my legs as my hands grasp the sheets.

My breath catches, my hips rise and fall. My legs spread wider, wanting *more more more* as I feel fingers plunge into my pussy, stroking against my g spot.

Fuck.

Yes.

I moan, not even recognizing the sound as coming from my own lips as I writhe beneath the rough, demanding touch. The fingers stroke in and out, curling deep, a strong palm grinding against my needy clit as I whimper and beg.

"*More*," I mewl softly into the dream ether. "*Give me more*."

Other fingers drag up my body, sliding over my breasts. They circle and then land on a pebbled, eager nipple, twisting and pulling and roughly pinching in the way my body craves and always responds to.

Pain. Fear. Danger. Domination.

The four fucked-up horsemen of my apocalyptic pleasure. The ones that make me squirm and writhe.

The ones that make me wish I was capable of actually coming.

Maybe I could orgasm in the Before Times. I mean, I had a boyfriend, Scott. I know I was on birth control, because I found a pack of pills tucked behind some books in my room a month or so after I was rescued. So I'd been having sex.

I just don't remember if I *came*.

I certainly haven't ever since my ordeal. I can bring myself close…so close that I can *taste* it. But it never happens.

Even in goddamn dreams.

I whimper, feeling my walls squeeze tight around the fingers roughly thrusting into my cunt. The ones pinching my nipple mercilessly drag across to the other side, viciously twisting it too as I cry out a wrenched sob of pleasure.

The hand pushes higher, over my collarbone, up to my neck and jaw. Fingers push into my mouth, thrusting across my tongue. They start to plunge in and out, fucking my mouth in time with the ones fucking my pussy.

Everything is hot. The air brushes over my skin like an erotic touch. The sheets tease against me. The low masculine groan of approval rumbles in my ears.

Wait—

My eyes fly open as lucidity rips me from the half-sleep I was just floating in. Instantly—*instantly*—my gaze clashes violently with his.

Bane.

He's looming over my bed, right over me, two fingers ramming into my pussy with loud, wet squelching sounds. His other fingers thrust into my mouth and over my tongue, just shy of gagging me as pleasure ripples through my core.

I try to cry out, but he just keeps finger-fucking my mouth. I squirm and buck and thrash, but he doesn't budge. He just smiles down at me, a wild,

venomous, unhinged look in his dark eyes as he shoves his fingers into me.

“*Stop!*” I finally scream. “*Get off me*!”

Except it doesn't come out as intelligible words, just a half-moaned whimper. And when his fingers *keep* ramming into me, I can feel my body responding.

My mouth is trying to say no. Stop. Don’t.

But it’s the only one in that fight. The rest of me, body and mind, are *not*.

Bane’s thick fingers curl deep in my clenching, soaking wet pussy. I cry out, my body jerking as pleasure ripples through my body. My stomach clenches, my back arching slightly, sending my nipples pointing toward the ceiling.

My mouth tries to fight again, screaming *stop* and *no* a few more times.

Bane just chuckles quietly, stroking his fingertips across my tongue with my lips wrapped around them.

“Shhhh, little bird,” he growls. “I know what your mouth is *trying* to say. But I don’t believe a word of it.” He pushes his two thick fingers deeper into my pussy, and I whine in pure pleasure as my hips lift from the bedsheets, trying to swallow even more of him.

“Your slutty little mouth is writing checks that the rest of your body won’t let you cash. You can whimper *stop*, and *no*, and *don’t* all you fucking want, baby,” he murmurs darkly. “But until this tight little cunt stops strangling my fingers and making a drippy fucking mess of my hand, I’m not going to believe you."

Fuck.

There’s something so unhinged in his tone, so malevolently *hot* in the snarling, dark expression on his face, that, mortifyingly, my body responds even more.

My hips lift again, my slick walls tight around his plunging fingers. My back arches, legs shaking as my hands grip the sheets in tight fists.

…And then my tongue swirls over the fingers in my mouth.

Instantly, my face turns to fire when I see his teeth flash and his lips curl dangerously.

"*There she is*," he growls darkly, ramming his fingers hard into me. "See, little bird? You say silly things like *no* and *stop*. But this greedy little pussy keeps shouting yes and sucking my fingers inside."

He exhales slowly and deeply as he leans down, his fingers still thrusting roughly in and out, filling the room with the wet, traitorous sounds of my arousal.

"But here's the thing, baby," he murmurs. His eyes glint wickedly as they meet mine in the darkness of the room.

"You signed our agreement. You've already given me permission to do what I want with you. So even if you're still trying to say no?"

I whimper, drooling around his fingers as he strokes them over my tongue, his mouth hovering near my ear.

"*I don't fucking care*," he growls. "You're my fucktoy. My plaything. My rape-slut, if I so choose."

Reality starts to blur. My body hums and throbs, my head swirling and my breath coming faster.

I've never been so turned on before.

I've never been so wet, and so desperate for more.

I've never been so fucking *close*.

Bane brings a third finger to my hole. I jolt, my eyes going round as they lock with his.

All I see is a look of dark malice mixed with greedy hunger. He starts to push three thick fingers into me, stretching my pussy wide as I gasp and squirm. My hand flies to his wrist, my fingers clawing at his arm, telling him I can't.

“You can do it,” he murmurs quietly, like he’s reading my fucking mind. “They'll fit. I’ll *make* them fit.”

I cry out around his hand, drowning in the hedonistic, totally fucked-up pleasure of it all as he starts to sink *three* fucking fingers into my eager pussy.

“So fucking tight, baby,” he growls. “Such a small, sweet little cunt. I’m going to have to stretch it out nice and wide if it's ever going to take my cock.”

I moan when his teeth rake over the shell of my ear.

“And you *are* going to be taking my cock, baby. In every one of your tight, greedy little holes.”

My fingers claw at his wrist. Suddenly, his fingers slide out of me with a slick, wet pop. I groan in frustration, mortified when I hear myself. But then he grabs my hand and brings my finger along with two of his against my opening.

Then he thrusts them all inside.

My fingers and his, knuckles-deep in my slick, wet pussy.

“Feel how fucking tight you are, baby,” he groans, ramming our fingers into me over and over. His other hand keeps finger-fucking my mouth, making me shake and writhe and shudder.

“Feel how desperate this pussy is for *more*. How slutty your little hole is, taking two of my fingers and one of yours all together. You want to touch yourself, baby?” he snarls. “The next time, *this* is how you fucking do it. You find me, and tell me your pussy needs to be stretched, and we’ll fuck you together, baby.”

Our hands start to move faster. Our fingers plunge and ram deep into me, and he curls mine along with his to hit my g spot on every thrust. His hand is on the back of mine, grinding my palm into my swollen clit as my eyes roll back.

My mouth drools around his fingers.

My legs start to shake uncontrollably.

My core clenches and tightens.

“Such a good girl,” he growls against my ear, his rasping voice mixing with the wet sounds of my pussy strangling our fingers. “I can feel your slutty little hole squeezing so tight. I know you want to come for me. I know you want to be my good girl and make a mess of our hands.”

I’m moaning and whimpering incoherently, trying to tell him I can’t.

I physically am unable to.

Except something all-consuming and wild is happening, which scares me as much as it excites me.

He rams our fingers deep in my clenching, dripping, quivering pussy, just as he buries his other fingers at the back of my throat.

I cry out when I feel his teeth pierce the delicate skin of my neck.

And suddenly, it's like a *bomb* exploding.

I don’t recognize the inhuman sound that rips from my chest. I don’t know how my body spasms on the bed, my back arching tight, my hips bucking hard against our fingers.

I don’t know what’s happening until suddenly *I do*, even if I can’t believe it.

Waves slam over me, sucking me down into the depths, drowning me in lurid darkness. They keep going—keep crashing into me, until I finally collapse in a shaking, whimpering, incoherent puddle on the bed.

Bane’s fingers slide out of my mouth and from between my legs, along with mine.

I still can’t talk, move, think or even breathe as my eyes swivel to his.

He brings his hand to his mouth. His lips wrap around his fingers—the same ones that were just inside my pussy. And slowly, his eyes never leaving mine, he sucks them clean, grinning darkly.

“Pleasant dreams, *baby*,” he growls quietly as he stands.

He doesn't say anything else. He just turns and walks away, leaving me straining to hear the sound of his footsteps down the stairs, and then the door to the carriage house opening, closing, and…oddly…*locking* again from the outside.

But I don’t have the bandwidth to untangle what just happened.

How he got in. How he locked the door again afterward.

How *long* he was here, touching me, watching me, before I was even awake.

All I can focus on is one, single thought burning like a flame in the endless darkness of my mind.

Holy fuck.

I just *came*.

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11

BANE

"WELL, this explains why you bit my fucking head off a few weeks ago."

Across the table from me, Laz cocks a brow.

"You could've just said she was your girl," he grins. "Here I've been, crying to my therapist about my best friend being short with me for no reason."

We're sitting in the VIP lounge of Smolder, a new cigar bar in Tribeca that Nero's recently invested in. I've decided not to point out that Nero doesn't smoke cigars himself. I gave up trying to understand the way my psychotic friend's mind works years ago…and I say this as someone with a fairly fucked-up brain himself.

Tonight, Nico is with Naomi out on Long Island, visiting his and Carmine's dad, Vito, so the crew is me, Carmine, Nero, Roman, and Laz.

"A, she's not *my girl*," I growl. "And B, I didn't bite your head off."

Laz pouts.

Roman chuckles. "I mean, I was there, and you *sort of* did."

"C," Carmine smirks from next to me, eying Laz, "there is a *zero* percent chance you've ever seen a therapist. And D, your best friend is your dick."

Laz grins over the rim of his glass. "Fuck you."

"I'm right, though," Carmine smirks.

Our friend sighs heavily and rolls his eyes. “Fine, yes to both. I mean, none of you has had the pleasure of being introduced to my dick, so I understand that you don’t get the depth of our relationship.”

I chuckle, shaking my head. “That's why I’m *also* positive you’ve never once seen a shrink.”

I’d know. I’ve seen easily a dozen of them since I was nine.

“Nope,” Laz beams, tapping his head. “I’m not crazy like some of you fuckers.”

“I'm not crazy, I’m a *creative thinker*,” Nero scowls. “Don’t try and force me into your neurotypical box, dickhead.”

Roman rolls his eyes and turns to shoot me a “which of us is going to tell him” look. I shrug and turn to our Italian friend, clapping a hand on his shoulder.

“Nero, I love you like a brother, but you’re fucking nuts.”

Nero grins. “I know. I’m just fucking with you. So…Dove. What’s the story?”

I shrug, bringing my vodka to my lips. “Just business.”

He frowns. “Business?”

“Yup,” I lie.

Nero taps the table in front of him, regarding me doubtfully. “Okay, but out of all the fucking Italians to get into bed with, you pick the Marchetti family?”

“I didn’t realize your sister was an option,” I reply dryly.

He glares at me. “You even *think* about Gabriella like that, and I’ll sodomize you with a hot poker.” He scowls. “On an unrelated note, the fuck aren’t any of you smoking?” He jabs a finger at the box of Cubans in the middle of the table.

Carmine smirks. “I was just waiting for you to go first. I mean, it’s your place.”

“But I don’t smoke cigars,” Nero shrugs.

I raise my brow. “So you invested in a cigar bar because…”

He frowns. “It’s a good investment. It’s just bus—” He sees the smug grin on my face and rolls his eyes, realizing he just walked right into that. “Oh, *fuck you*.”

Laz laughs as he selects a cigar from the box. Carmine does the same, and I watch them both deftly clip off the ends, bring them to their lips, and light them.

“No one else?” Laz asks.

I shake my head. “Not my thing.”

“Roman?” he grunts, turning to offer the box. Roman shakes his head, twisting the glass of Coke on the table in front of him. “Nah. I made Val quit cigarettes. It’d be a dickhead move to come home smelling like smoke.”

Laz cocks a brow. “How’s that going, by the way?”

Roman frowns. “How’s what going?”

“The being into dudes thing.”

Roman smiles. “I’m not into dudes. I’m into one particular dude.”

Roman and I are pretty close. Actually, out of the crew, he’s arguably the one I’m tightest with. But even I didn’t realize one of the reasons he was always so angry, and violent, and *wasted*, was that he was fighting a war within himself between what was expected of him and his true nature.

I.e., *gay*.

Yes, choosing sobriety and quitting booze has been a huge part of the change in him over the past few months. So has stepping up to the Nikitin throne after his father was banished to Russia.

But I know the biggest reason my friend has changed is Val. In him, Roman has found true love and happiness.

My jaw sets.

I had that, once.

Nero frowns. “So you don’t find *any* other guy on the planet attractive?”

“Don't be so needy, De Luca,” Carmine sighs. “It screams desperation.” The rest of us, Roman included, crack up as Nero flips us all off.

“I’m just curious. Jesus,” he mutters.

Roman folds his arms over his broad chest. “Do you find any other women other than Milena attractive?”

Nero scowls. “Nope,” he says instantly.

“None at all?”

He sighs. “I mean, I recognize beauty when I see it, but I’m not attracted to…oh fuck off, I walked right into that one, too, didn't I.”

Roman chuckles. “Yes, you did.”

Laz clears his throat. “Can I ask a personal question?”

“I’d be shocked if it was anything less,” Roman says, shaking his head.

Laz takes another puff of his cigar. “Before Val…did you…you know…”

Roman cocks a brow. “Know I was gay?”

“Actually I was going to ask if you’d hooked up with any dudes before that.”

“Jesus, Kislev,” Nero growls, glaring at Laz. “Chill.”

“What?” Laz mutters. “I’m just asking a question!”

“Yeah, a *personal* fucking one,” Carmine mutters, “that Roman doesn’t have to—”

“Nah, it’s cool,” Roman chuckles, shaking his head. “The answer is no. There was never a guy before Val.”

“Lots of girls, though.”

Roman shrugs at Laz's equally invasive follow-up. "Well, yeah. I was doing a whole lot of running from who I am, and pretending I was someone else."

Laz's brows knit. "So…I'm curious…why do you say you're gay, then, and not bi? Cause, you know, you've fucked both now…"

I roll my eyes. "Laz, I think you've officially wandered off the trail with this one. Why does it matter?"

He shrugs, frowning as he glances down. "I dunno. I've been…" He clears his throat. "I've been thinking about, you know, maybe being a switch hitter."

Roman roars with laughter. Nero chokes on his drink.

"I'm sorry, *what*?" Carmine asks.

Laz scowls at us. "Thanks for being so accepting, motherfuckers."

Roman shakes his head and turns to him. "Sorry, you just caught me off-guard." His brow furrows and his expression turns serious. "You really think you might be bi, Laz?"

Laz shrugs. "I mean, girls are great, don't get me wrong. I *love* pussy—"

"Yes, I think *aliens* are aware of that," Carmine sighs.

"*Well*, it got me thinking," Laz continues. "There's a whole half of the population I'm potentially missing out on, you know?"

The rest of us groan as Roman rolls his eyes.

"I'm just saying!" Laz keeps going. "There are some nights when, you know, a hole's a hole, right? And her I am *limiting* myself to only one specific *kind* of hole."

"Such a noble exploration of your self-identity," I sigh.

"Oh, whatever. Fuck you guys," Laz mutters, puffing on his cigar. "*Anyway*, let's get back to the subject at hand. Dove." He jabs his cigar across the table at me. "And you, another of my fellow soldiers, down for the count." He makes a face. "God fucking dammit, that's all of you now!"

“Guess you’ll need to settle down if you want to keep chilling with us,” I smirk.

“I think I’d rather find new friends.”

Nero takes a sip of his drink and glances at me. “All kidding aside, getting into bed with Cesare is…a choice.”

“It’s good for the family,” I shrug. “It gets us access to the waterfront.”

“It gets Cesare access to *you*, too,” Nero says pointedly. “I mean it. Don’t let your guard down with that fucker. His whole perpetually half-drunk, jovial asshole bit is a mask, believe me.”

“Appreciate the warning,” I nod. “But I know what I’m doing. I’ll be careful.”

After that, we all lapse into regular friend conversation—work, the lamentable state of the Mets, Laz being a complete whore, how my friends are doing in their relationships.

That last one always throws me. On the one hand, I’m happy for them, of course. If you’d asked me even a few years ago if our group of fairly fucked up, borderline and in some cases legit psychotic friends would *ever* be in deep, meaningful relationships with people they call soulmates, I’d have laughed.

But here we are. Carmine with Lyra. Nico and Naomi. Nero utterly besotted with Milena. Roman head over heels with Val.

And now me and *her*.

But my situation isn’t like theirs. Not just because of the obvious.

I’m not sure I’m capable of what they all have. I doubted it after what happened when I was nine. But then I met Lark, and my broken, jagged perspective changed.

…And then Dove Marchetti convinced her to go out one night and use their fake IDs to go to that bar, where they met *that fucking monster*.

And everything changed.

I changed.

Outside later, Laz takes off with Nero, and Roman and I wave goodbye as Carmine roars off in his Lamborghini. Then it's just the two of us.

Like I said, Roman is arguably the buddy that I'm closest with. A lot of that has to do with his father Pavel and mine being such close allies for so long.

I mean, until Pavel tried to have my dad *killed* a few months ago, and all the bullshit that ensued.

But yes, Roman and I grew up together and we're close—close enough that he's the only one of my friends who ever knew about Lark.

Not many people did.

First, Lark had asked me to keep "us" a secret. Maybe she was weirded out to be dating a guy who was going to take over a bratva empire someday, but I like to think it was down to her being a private person. So nobody knew we were dating. All my friends went to other schools, so it was easy to keep it quiet.

But I ended up telling Roman because I had to tell someone.

In the bratva world, marriage isn't necessarily a matter of love. It's about power. For cementing alliances, for burying bad blood.

Lark wasn't from a mafia family. Her grandmother was just the housekeeper for one. There were no alliances to be made with her. No power to be consolidated. No feuds to end.

I just…loved her.

We were young—probably too young. And we weren't perfect. I know she had her own issues and demons. But I asked her to marry me anyway, because when you're young and the world hasn't quite fucked you up enough yet, you think you can overcome any obvious pitfalls.

When I asked her to marry me, my father had his concerns, of course. But those concerns came from a place of love—a place of being my *father* before my *pakhan*, the head of a Bratva family.

He didn’t give a fuck that Lark had no mafia power or money or connections to bring to the table. He just wanted me to be happy.

Roman was the other one I told. So, I’m waiting for it when he sighs and turns to me as Carmine’s supercar roars away into the New York night.

“So…Dove Marchetti?” he growls.

“Story hasn’t changed, man,” I mutter. “It’s just business.”

“Uh-huh,” he says dryly. “Look, we both know there’s not a snowball’s chance in hell that anything between you and Dove can be *just business*.”

“Why?”

He levels a look at me. “C’mon, Bane…”

“Roman, I don’t—”

“I’m going to ask you something shitty,” he growls. “And I’m banking on you understanding it comes from a place of love, brother.”

I lift a brow. “Go for it.”

“Tell me this isn’t a weird revenge thing.”

My jaw grinds. “It isn’t a weird revenge thing,” I grunt.

It’s far more complicated than simply a weird revenge thing.

Roman nods. “Another shitty question, if I may…”

I sigh. “Go ahead.”

“She, uh…” He clears his throat. “She really does look like Lark. Dove, I mean.”

I ignore the sudden throb under the scar on my chest.

“I didn't hear a question there,” I grunt.

Roman lifts his brows. “I mean…”

“*No*, Roman,” I growl. “I’m not marrying Dove Marchetti because she looks similar to an older version of my dead fiancée.”

His face crumples, his lips pulling tight. He sets a heavy hand on my shoulder. “Sorry, man. I wasn’t trying to—”

“All good.” I smile as I bring him in for a hug, clapping him twice on the back before we pull apart.

“Had to ask,” he shrugs.

I grin. “I know. I was kinda waiting for it.”

“So, we’re good?”

“Always,” I nod, fist bumping him as he fishes his keys out of his pocket. “Hi to Val for me.”

We can leave it there. As much as I love my friend, neither he nor anyone else needs to know the *real* reason I’ve trapped my bird in a little cage.

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12

DOVE

"OH MY *GOD*, this place is *adorable*!"

I smile at Evelina's reaction to my place.

I sometimes hesitate to call the dancers I hang out with at ballet "friends". At the risk of sounding cliched: it's not them, it's me. But Lyra, Naomi, Milena, Evelina, Brooklyn, and even Val—though I don't usually do so well making guy friends—are great, and *have* become good friends.

They've also been great during the jarring madness of my reality over the past week, even if it's just been by *not* asking about it, or adding their two cents.

Honestly, that's priceless right now.

I don't tend to have anyone over. Let me rephrase: *none* of them has ever visited, except for Brooklyn a couple of times. I've never really shared anything about my background with her, but I know hers was pretty rocky. Maybe that's why she and I click so well, and why I've felt fine bringing her into what the leaders of group therapy back at *Il Refugio* would call my "safe space".

But tonight, after rehearsal, when I found myself in the changing room with just Brooklyn and Evie, I decided to say fuck it and invite them both over.

…It might *partly* have something to do with the other night.

With *Bane*.

I feel a heated throb in my core as my mind replays everything that happened. How it started while I was asleep. How rough and dark he was. How insidiously alluring the vicious things he said to me were.

I've reminded myself since then how badly the deck is stacked. Bane's gone through my computer. He *knows* all the dark, fucked-up stuff, sexually, that I'm into.

Somno, aka sleep sex. Dubcon and noncon. Pain mixed with pleasure.

Not that whatever the fuck is unfolding between us is a *game*. But if it is, it's a one-sided, rigged one.

He's read my playbook. He's peeked through the blinds and seen me without my armor.

And all of that *might* be partly why I've asked Brooklyn and Evelina over. It might also be why I'm asking them in a second if they feel like sleeping over.

It's not that I'm scared of him coming back.

I'm scared that I *want him* to.

"Dove!" Evie beams, her face lit up as she turns to me. "Seriously! This place is *adorable*!"

Evie is basically a Disney princess. Like, if you were to install a hidden camera and it caught her singing to woodland creatures while they danced on her arms and brought her bon-bons?

It would not surprise me.

Another way to sum her up in a single word is "pink". Not the punk, fuck-you pink I wear. Evie's is pure princess pink. Tutu pink. Tea-party, picnic-in-the-park-while-reading-Jane-Austen pink.

Like right now, for instance. She's all in pink: leggings, skirt, fluffy mohair sweater, even the ribbon tying up her long blonde hair.

Still, you gotta love her. It doesn't hurt that she also might be one of the sweetest, most genuine, *earnest* humans I've ever met.

“Thanks.” I smile and spread my arms. “Welcome to my madness.”

Brooklyn’s jaw drops open as she briskly walks past me toward a work-in-progress I’ve had sitting on an easel for the last month.

“*Damn*, girl,” she whistles, her eyes tracing over the oversized canvas.

“It’s…an ongoing thing,” I shrug. Right now, it’s just a wash of reds and purples sliced by violent black lines. “It’s not done, but I’m not sure what comes next.”

“Okay, I knew you painted,” Evie murmurs as she walks up next to Brooklyn and stares wide-eyed at the canvas. “But I thought it was, like, landscapes.”

Yeah, psychotic landscapes from the hellish recesses of my nightmares.

She turns to me. “You’re *really* good.”

I grin. “Thanks, Evie.” I drop my dance bag behind the sofa and walk into the kitchen area. “You guys want anything? I’ve got soda, sparkling water, juice…”

“I’m good,” Brooklyn calls back to me. “I actually can’t stay that long. Kir and I have plans tonight.”

Shit.

There goes half the forces for Operation Sleepover.

“I’ll take a diet soda if you have it!” Evie says.

I walk back over to them with some lemony sparkling water for me and a Diet Coke for Evie.

She cracks it open and grins at Brooklyn. “So, what are these plans with Kir?”

Kir as in Kir Nikolayev, the head of the Nikolayev Bratva, also known as Brooklyn’s *much* older boyfriend. Also-*also* known for bonus points as the guy who owns the Mercury Theater and finances the Zakharova Ballet.

Brooklyn grins at Evie. “I’ll tell Dove. You’ll have to cover your ears.”

I giggle when Evie's jaw drops.

"What! Why??" she pouts.

Brooklyn laughs. "Babe, have you *met* you?"

That's another Evelina thing: in addition to being one of the sweetest people you'll ever meet, she's also *frighteningly* innocent. Like, to the point that it would keep me up at night but for the fact that her brother, Roman, who runs the Nikitin Bratva now, has guards following her *all* the time.

Literally. They followed us here and they're parked across the street.

Evie makes a face. "Well that's crap."

Oh, and she doesn't swear.

Evie pokes Brooklyn with a finger. "Come *on*! What's the huge secret!?"

Brooklyn rolls her eyes. "Okay! Fine. If you *must* know…"

Evie grins, leaning close for the big reveal.

"Our big plans involve Kir bending me over the kitchen table and railing the shit out of me."

I snort, laughing uproariously as poor Evie's face turns *crimson*. Her jaw drops, eyes bulging wide as Brooklyn tosses her head back and howls with laughter.

"I *said* you didn't want to know!" she giggles, throwing her arms around Evelina. "Sorry, Evie. I didn't mean to scar you for life."

Evie's face is still bright red as she pulls back and tries to…well, I think it's meant to be a nonchalant shrug, but it looks like she's trying to stop herself from having a seizure.

"You didn't *scar me*." She does another super-awkward "casual" shrug as she turns back to the painting. "Just…caught me off-guard."

Brooklyn glances at me and rolls her eyes.

The three of us spend the next fifteen minutes or so hanging out, talking about ballet and listening to music. Then I find myself clearing my throat as the intrusive thoughts in my head win and the question I've been trying not to ask tumbles out.

"Hey, so, uh…" I glance at Brooklyn. "Kir sits at the Iron Table, right?"

She nods, her brows knitting. "Yeah?"

The Iron Table is a collective of some of the most powerful bratva families in the world. I've heard it described as like the United Nations of the Russian mafia.

Kir sits on it.

…And I know Bane's father does, too.

"Does he…I mean, do you *both*…ever hang out socially with the other table members and their families?"

Brooklyn smirks. "Like the Antonovs?" she says dryly. "*For example*?"

My face heats. "Sure."

Brooklyn smiles at me. "Look, I don't know the full situation with you and Bane. If there's stuff you want to talk about—"

"Nope," I blurt, a little too quickly. "I'm good. I'm just…" I frown and look down. "Do you know much about him?"

Because I don't. Not really. My recollections of him are blurry and vague at best. I *sort of* remember him being Lark's moody boyfriend. I'm sure he came to the house on a semi-frequent basis. Beyond that, my memories of the man I'm marrying begin at Lark's funeral.

With him walking up to me, leveling a vicious, cold stare right into my soul, and saying, "This is your fault. You did this."

Brooklyn smiles wryly. "Not a lot, honestly. But I've spent *some* time with him, and…" She trails off, shaking her head. "Look, I don't know your relationship with him. But Bane's a good guy. Quiet, a little broody, but one of the good ones."

“He’s one of Roman’s best friends,” Evie chimes in. “I wouldn’t say I know him that well…I don’t know if many people do—okay, maybe Roman. But I agree. He can be quiet, and he’s kind of intense. But he’s a good guy. I mean, Roman’s had him drive me home alone plenty of times, and you know how overprotective my big brother is. He’d *never* let Bane do that if he didn’t trust him completely.”

It would be a more ringing endorsement if my mind wasn’t actively replaying the memory of that “good guy” pinning me down in my sleep the other night and roughly finger-fucking me to a screaming orgasm—my *first*—while telling me my slutty hole was making a mess of his fingers.

I mean…*Jesus fuck.*

Eventually, Brooklyn has to go.

Wouldn’t want to be late for the kitchen table railing, I suppose. Although, I have eyes and I've *met* Kir…so I can’t really say I blame her.

When she’s gone, Evie turns to me. “If you’ve got stuff to do, I can—”

“Wanna stay over?” I blurt.

Evie blinks, looking stunned.

“I mean, if you’re busy, don’t even worry about—”

“I’d love to!” she blurts back, beaming. “Totally!”

Sweet.

* * *

“HE REALLY IS A GOOD GUY.”

Two hours later, *Donnie Darko*—which I’m not really that shocked to learn Evie hasn’t seen before—is finishing, and the sushi we had delivered has mostly disappeared from the plastic trays in front of us.

Next to me on the couch, Evelina rolls her head to the side to look at me.

“Honestly,” she says. “He might come off as grumpy or antisocial, but that’s just him.” She giggles. “Maybe it’s a guy version of resting bitch face.”

I laugh as she reaches over and pops another piece of sashimi into her mouth.

“Something…” She shakes her head. “Never mind.”

I frown. “What?”

“No, I don’t want to share rumors.”

“Evie, please?” I plead. “I’m marrying the guy.”

She gives me a sympathetic look. “Fair. Okay, it’s probably nothing, I just…” She pokes at her pickled ginger. “I don’t know *what*, but Roman has mentioned that something happened to Bane. Like, when he was a kid.”

My brows knit. “What?”

“Dunno,” she shrugs. “But I think Roman said it was maybe the reason, or one of the reasons, Bane is the way he is.”

Hmm.

Interesting.

I offer to sleep on the couch and give her the bed up in the loft, but Evie insists on staying downstairs. Then the two of us are back to gabbing again.

Honestly, I have no idea why I haven’t hung out with her one on one before. She’s *awesome*.

Sheltered and crazy innocent, of course, but awesome.

She hesitantly looks at me. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Were you two a couple before the engagement?”

I make a face. “*Nope*.”

Evie frowns. “So…that video of you and Bane…”

“Yeah… He staged that.”

Her eyes go wide as saucers. “*What*?”

Evie of all people doesn’t need to know *why* I was up on the roof of the Empire State Building with Bane. But I can at least dispel any myths about that kiss being *real* in any way.

“Yeah, he staged it.” I look away. “To trap me.”

The space goes quiet. I turn to see Evie looking at me in shock. “And I was just telling you what a great guy he is…” Her face falls. “Like, to trap you into marriage? Roman said something about your dad having a new shipping dock—”

“Yeah, it’s not that.”

She frowns. “Then—”

“Can I tell you something?” It just pops out.

She nods. “Of course.”

This…*thing* inside me has to come out. Maybe I’ve just been holding it inside for too long. Or maybe in some weird way, Evie kind of reminds me of, well, *me*— if things hadn’t gotten fucked up along the way.

“It’s…big.” My lip catches between my teeth. “Like, really big.”

She nods. “You can tell me. I just…” She smiles wryly, shrugging. “You sure you want to tell *me*? We’re not…” She pauses. “I mean, we’re friends, and I *love* being friends, I just—”

“Evie.” I place a gentle hand on her arm. “I…don’t have a lot of close friends.”

She tips her head. “You and Brooklyn seem close.”

“We are. But this…” I shrug. “I dunno. It feels like I need to tell someone, and that someone needs to be you.“ I sigh. “I guess I just…trust you?”

Evie smiles and squeezes my hand. “I’m *really* good at keeping secrets.” She glances away. “*Believe me*,” she mutters under her breath.

I smile wryly, then slowly exhale.

Welcome to the deep end, Evie. Take a deep breath.

“You know how I don’t drink when we all go out?”

Evie smiles, instantly looking relieved. “Oh! It’s okay, I get it. Roman is a recovering alcoholic, too. I’m happy to talk about—”

“No, I don’t drink because I’m a *heroin addict*.”

The room goes pin-drop silent. I swallow heavily, looking down at my hands.

“I’ve been clean and sober for almost two years. But for a while…” I squeeze my eyes shut. “I…*yeah*.”

There's a pause, then her hand quietly slides across the couch to take mine, squeezing. I look up, feeling so vulnerable, but getting a wave of comfort when I see Evie smiling.

“You can tell me anything. You can also tell me nothing,” she says softly.

I nod, biting my lip.

“I got into it at boarding school. And I got sent *there* because of something that happened back here, in New York, when I was seventeen.” I look down again. “I had this best friend growing up, named Lark. She was being raised by her grandma, who was our housekeeper. So she lived with us.”

My mouth twists in a mix of sadness and vague emotions that make me smile.

“We did everything together. She even came to school with me at Thornfield Prep.” I glance over at her. “Bane was at Thornfield, too. And he and Lark…” I smile. “They were a couple. Like, a totally in love couple.” I exhale. “He even asked her to marry him.”

“*Whoa*,” Evie breathes. “I…I didn’t know that about him.”

“I don’t think anyone does,” I say quietly.

I reach for my phone and scroll to the folder I don’t always let myself look at.

“Here,” I say quietly, scooting over so she can see the screen too. “This is Lark.”

I tap on a picture taken when we were ten—us sitting on the front steps of my dad’s house with the jack-o-lanterns we’d just carved.

“Oh, *wow*!” Evie murmurs. Her eyes move between me and the picture, then back up to me. “You two look *so* similar.”

I smile quietly. “I know. Her mom was blonde Italian too, like mine. She died giving birth to Lark, which is why she was with her grandmother.” My heart wrenches a little as I look down at the two smiling girls, sitting on the stoop, grinning through missing teeth.

“We always loved how similar we looked.” I laugh softly. “We’d joke about being sisters.”

I can feel the question hanging in the air, so I answer it before she can ask.

“She died.”

Pain stabs into me as I take a deep breath.

Part of me almost wants to tell her about the rest. The night Lark and I snuck out with our fake IDs.

The man at the bar who used to drive for my dad, who offered us a ride home.

The two days of horror and torture and pain that followed, before most of my memories vanished into the ether.

But that’s…too much for someone like Evie.

“It was my fault she died, and Bane blames me for it.”

The short version is bad enough.

“*Oh my God, Dove…*”

I’m not really a hugger, but I’m grateful for the one Evie gives me after all that comes out. She holds me tightly, my chest shaking as I suck back the tears before they can fall.

“I’m so, *so* sorry,” she says quietly as she pulls away, her face earnest and raw and real, like she’s truly feeling the same emotions that are rampaging through my heart. She frowns. “So…wait… Bane is doing this for revenge? That’s *insane*.”

I nod quietly. “Maybe. Well, partly.”

She shakes her head, frowning. “There’s more to it than that? What do you remember about them dating?”

I decide that spilling my guts to Evie about my addiction is my limit on brutal honesty for the evening.

My amnesia can stay in the same “do not share” pile with the graphic details of Lark's and my abduction.

“Not much,” I shrug. “I mean, it was years ago, and… You know how it is. When she was with Bane, they kind of did their own thing.”

At least, I think they did.

Evie looks down at my phone, still open to the photos of Lark and me.

“You *really* look similar. I mean, not twins or anything, but…*whoa*.” Her nose wrinkles as she lifts her eyes to me. “It’s…kinda weird that he wants to marry you, when you and Lark—”

“*Yeah*,” I groan, shuddering. “Tell me about it.”

Evie sighs deeply, then looks at me with a soft, kind smile on her face. “Thanks for trusting me with all of that. Seriously. It means a lot.”

I smile back, my lips twisting as I take her hands in mine and give them a squeeze. “Thanks for listening.”

“I won’t tell a soul.” She shakes her head. “And literally *nothing* about what you just told me changes how I think of you, or our friendship. I mean

that.”

Again, not a hugger. But damn, I don't mind the next one she gives me.

“Evie,” I sigh into her shoulder. “This world does not deserve you.”

* * *

EVIE and I talk late into the night, basically becoming best friends. I share a little more about my addiction journey, and rehab. She tells me how she worries that everyone treats her with kid gloves. I spill my guts over my mental health issues—some of them, anyway. And she discusses the mixed feelings she has concerning her dad being dethroned and banished to Russia not too long ago.

“I mean, don’t get me wrong, my dad is *not* a nice man. He had a gun in Roman’s face, and almost killed Bane’s father…” She shakes her head. “But he’s still *Dad*, you know?”

Eventually, both of us are losing the fight to keep our eyes open. I rustle up a pair of pajamas for her to change into, then tell her I have to check on something in the main house real quick.

Such a lie.

Instead, I linger in the darkness of the back garden, fingernails tap-tapping on the side of my phone. I take a deep, empowering breath, steeling myself.

Then I’d get ready to have some very uncomfortable conversations with just about everyone who thought they knew you.

That motherfucker thinks he’s got me backed into a corner with his threats to tell everyone about my drug issues and my time in rehab.

Fuck. Him.

Yes, telling Evie about my addiction issues was hard. But it was also freeing.

Emboldening.

Fresh power is burning inside me as I tap on Bane's number and bring the phone to my ear. It rings, and rings, and rings, *and rings*…then goes to voicemail.

That'll do.

There's the usual outgoing message followed by a beep.

Showtime.

"*Hi*, asshole!" I say, my voice laden with fake cheer. "It's me, the girl you're being a total creep to. To narrow that down, since I'm sure there are many of those, I'm the one you're forcing to marry you—like a creep—and you think you've got me by the balls because you hacked into my computer to look at what I do in my private time." I sigh. "Now, I'm *pretty* sure you think you've got me in a bind, because you threatened to tell all my friends about the *very* private matter of my history of drug abuse and mental health challenges." I sneer into the phone. "Again, *like. A fucking. Creep*. So, let me make this clear, you fucking small-dicked did-I-mention-creep incel: *you don't own me*. You don't have leverage over me. You want to tell people that I had a nightmare of a time with heroin? *Do it*, bitch," I spit. "It'll make you look exactly like the heartless asshole you are, and no one will give a fuck anyway. *I* certainly don't. So do your worst, shrimp-dick." I smirk in the darkness. "Dove *out*."

I hit the end call button with a flourish, my pulse racing, triumph surging through my veins.

Take that, motherfucker.

"You look happy," Evie grins at me from the couch when I waltz back in. "Everything okay?"

"Everything is grand," I beam at her. "Now, are you *sure* you don't want the bed? Seriously, I'm happy to sleep on the couch."

She shakes her head. "I'm good down here."

I walk over and give her another big hug.

“Seriously,” I murmur. “Thank you for earlier. For listening, and not judging—”

“Dove.” She pulls back, smiling at me. “You don’t have to thank me for being a good person.”

“Well, I want to, okay?”

We both laugh and say our goodnights. Then I skip up the stairs to the loft area, shut off the lights, and slide under the covers, my heart light.

I think this nightmare ride with Bane might be at end.

At some point, I fall asleep. I dream of snow, and then suddenly I’m on stage with the Zakharova, dancing in *The Nutcracker*, my feet carrying my body effortlessly through the movements.

But then the dream morphs around me, and everything goes wrong. My arms can’t move gracefully anymore. They can’t move *at all*, actually. Then it’s my legs and feet that feel trapped.

A weight settles down heavily on my chest as my pulse starts to beat faster.

What’s happening? Why can’t I—

That’s when I wake with a gasp, coming to two horrifying realizations.

One: my arms and legs are bound tight to the bed.

Two: *Bane* is straddling my sternum, his eyes glinting with dark fire, his mouth curled in a demonic grin.

…And his tattooed hand wrapped around his huge—and I do mean *huge*—cock, fisting it slowly mere inches above my face.

“Your mouth had a whole lot of not-so-nice words for my voicemail earlier, little bird,” he growls quietly. “Let’s see if we can fill it with something more *fun*.”

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13

DOVE

AT FIRST, between his weight on my body, the fierce, slightly unhinged look in his eyes, and the fact that he's stroking his *cock* barely six inches from my face, I'm frozen in place.

Then my fight or flight instinct kicks in, and I bring my arms up to try to shove him off me.

That's when I realize my dream wasn't entirely made up. When I try to move, I discover that my arms are *tied* above my head to the headboard. My legs are similarly bound, each ankle pulled toward one of the lower corners of the bed, leaving my legs spread.

I try to thrust my torso up to dislodge him.

…It goes about as well as you'd imagine.

I might be in fantastic physical shape, like all dancers, but Bane is a wall of solid muscle. Even in the dim glow of a garden light coming from outside, I can see the rippling, veined muscles of his forearms, see his biceps straining at the sleeves of his black t-shirt stretched tight across his chest.

I can feel his thighs spread either side of my ribs, utterly pinning me down and making me feel the full extent of his power over me.

A sinister feeling ignites the air around me as Bane's eyes pierce into mine. He languidly fists his hard, throbbing cock, bulging from his unzipped black jeans.

“*Get the fuck—!*”

My words muffle as his hand leaves his cock and clamps over my mouth. His gaze holds mine unflinchingly as he slowly shakes his head.

“*Uh-uh-uh, little bird*,” he whispers in a deep, rumbling tone. “Let’s not wake your *houseguest*.”

Evie.

My head wrenches to the side, looking at the railing of the loft area that looks down over the room below, where Evelina is fast asleep on the couch.

“*EVIE*!” I scream.

But all that comes out through the heavy palm covering my mouth is a very muffled *EEE-eee*!

“I said let's *not* wake—”

I scream her name through his palm again. But then suddenly he reaches behind him with his other hand, and I blurt a choked cry into it when his palm roughly smacks the inside of my thigh, *way* up high. His hand lingers there, his fingers lightly stroking the heat blooming on my skin as his eyes lock with mine, past the heavy weight of his cock bobbing above my face.

“I dislike having to repeat myself, little bird,” he murmurs quietly.

“*FUCK YOU*!”

It comes out more like a muffled “*phhhcckkkoooo!*”

Bane doesn’t make a sound, doesn’t utter a word. For a second, he doesn’t even *move*. I tremble, my stomach twisting as his dark eyes lance into me.

I’ve felt his malevolence before. His disdain. His anger. But for the first time, I’m realizing quite suddenly—abruptly, jarringly—the full depth of his *fury* toward me for what I did.

I’ve seriously underestimated the monster I’m going to be marrying.

Without warning, his icy stillness cracks and shatters. He reaches back again, grabbing the crotch of my sleep shorts. I jolt, stunned, when he yanks

them down to mid-thigh before reaching for my panties.

I scream into his palm as he grabs the waist of them and yanks up so hard it lifts my butt from the bed, bringing my hips up against his weight. Then the lacy fabric rips.

Bane abruptly drags my ruined, tattered underwear down my legs, pushing them and the shorts past my knees. He roughly grabs a thigh and forces my legs apart, at least as far as he can with the binds on my ankles and the clothing tangled at my knees.

And then, without warning, he does something I never in a million years imagined would ever happen to me.

He slaps my fucking pussy.

I scream into his hand, my body twisting and igniting as scorching hot pain explodes between my legs.

But then there's a second feeling that immediately follows the blinding pain, twisting and snarling inside me.

…*Arousal*.

Hunger. An unhinged madness that uncoils and slithers through my core.

No.

Even as my body rebels at the thought—even as I twist and writhe as the stinging heat of his smack against my most sensitive area burns through me — another sensation creeps in.

Needy.

Achy.

My walls clench tight, and to my horror, I feel throbbing heat deep in my core.

I’m broken.

Because even as the sting of his smack radiates through my body, I’m fucking *wet*. Mortifyingly so.

I swallow against his palm, my eyes wide with shock. I stare up at him in a mix of shame and horror, my gaze clashing with the black fire in his eyes.

Dark venom swirls through my core. Bane brings his hand back from between my legs, and my pulse skips when he wraps it around his cock again. He moves his other hand away from my mouth to stroke two fingers across my lips.

“Now,” he murmurs darkly. “My guess is, you actually *don’t* want Evie to wake up and find you, well, *like this*.” He grins maliciously. “I think this is what they call a *compromising position*.”

Before I can even dare mouth off again, he slips two fingers between my lips and sinks them deep, gliding them over my tongue as his eyes lock with mine.

“No, we don’t want to wake her,” he growls. “And, well…” He grins malevolently at me, his smile glinting in the low light. “I guess I just don’t trust you not to make a sound, little bird.”

His fingers start to stroke rhythmically in and out over my tongue. My body stiffens, as if to rebel. But there’s a needy, demanding throb pulsing inside me, too—a traitorous, horrifying heat still tingling and pooling in my pussy even as it stings from his smack.

“So let's give this mouth something else to do instead of waking your friend.”

He drags his fingers slowly out of my mouth, smearing the slick pads of them over my lower lip, prying it open. I swallow heavily as I watch his other hand stroke his enormous erection. A glistening drop beads at the swollen head before slowly trickling down the underside.

“Now, what was the expression you used? Ah, yes…” His eyes glint as a cold smile creeps over his jaw. “*Shrimp dick*.”

Bane pushes just the swollen head of his cock into my mouth, and monstrous *need* flickers to life inside me. He strokes himself, lifting his dick and letting it slap heavily against my lips.

The aching need inside me grows.

Bane slowly jerks his cock, rubbing the head over my lips and tapping it against them again.

“I think the usual saying involves putting a *foot* in your mouth, but let’s see how you do with *this* instead.”

His fingers slide into my mouth, pushing down on my tongue as he forces my jaw wide. He rolls his hips, pushing his huge dick over my lips and into my mouth as he slides his fingers out.

A broken, needy sound rumbles through the air, and I realize with a start that it came from *me*.

Bane groans, his eyes glinting.

“Fuck, your mouth feels so good whimpering around my cock, baby.”

I glare at him and let my teeth graze down across his dick, like a warning.

Bane just *chuckles*.

“Go ahead, little bird,” he murmurs. “We’ve got more in common than you think.” I whimper again as he pushes another inch of his cock into my mouth, utterly heedless of the scrape of my teeth. “We both know how you like a touch of darkness to your fantasy. Lucky for you…”

I shiver, my body tensing as he wraps his hand around my throat and sinks another inch of his cock over my tongue.

“*So do I.*”

I gag a little as he forces his thick cock into the back of my throat. He holds it there, his eyes locked on mine as they go wide.

I want to say I hate this, and *him* for doing it.

But that needy, monstrous thing inside me *roars*, aching for more.

More.

More.

Like the toxic need for the poison I used to push into my veins, the line between pleasure and self-harm blurring until it's just one messy, surging, aching craving, dark and twisted.

Bane groans quietly as he slides his cock out of my mouth only to ram it right back in again. I choke and sputter, my body shuddering under his. But the demanding heat that pools between my thighs, and the way my core twists and throbs and *wants*, doesn't allow me to lie to myself about hating this, or hating him for doing it.

I try to remind myself how unfair this is. He's peeked inside my fucked-up head. He *knows* what demented shit turns me on, and he's weaponized it.

But I still find myself moaning and humming around his fat cock as he grunts and roughly drives it into the back of my throat. His fingers splay around my neck, tightening just enough to send that illicit, violent need for *more* exploding through my twisted brain.

My whimpers grow louder around his thrusting cock. Bane groans, his jaw tight and his eyes locked on mine as he slowly shakes his head. "*Uh-uh*, little bird," he hisses through clenched teeth. "Wouldn't want to wake little Evie of all people and have her see what a needy, slutty like fuck toy you are."

Jesus.

Pure, raw desire thunders through my body. I squirm under him, desperate for friction *anywhere*. Bane's hand slides from my throat, like the need is written in neon across my face. He rips my tank top down, letting my breasts spill free. A finger and thumb find my nipple, pinching and twisting it mercilessly as I cry out and moan around his cock.

He brutalizes the other nipple, bringing another choked whimper to my throat as he fucks my mouth.

"Mmmm, fuck, baby," he groans. "This mouth of yours was *made* for sucking my cock. Such a good girl…"

I moan loudly, the sound broken and desperate.

Bane groans, grabbing a fistful of my hair as he starts to ram harder into my mouth. His other hand slides back behind him, and I shudder when he cups my still-stinging pussy.

“See?” he growls, groaning as he buries his cock in my throat. “It’s not vanilla that makes this pussy a drippy, needy mess when I use this slutty little mouth as my personal fuck-hole.”

He strokes a thick finger up and down my slick folds, and suddenly pinches my swollen clit. I cry out, gagging around his cock as a wave of pleasure slams into me.

“It’s *pain*,” he growls. “That’s what gets you off, baby. Danger, the loss of control, and *pain*.”

He pinches my clit again, wrenching a strangled moan from my throat. He suddenly rams two fingers into me, making me moan and gag around his cock again as my body spasms, my hips arching against his body.

Bane groans deeply. His eyes, full of black, vicious violence and domination, never leave mine as he grips my hair even tighter, thrusting his swollen cock into my mouth as he pumps his thick fingers in and out of my soaking wet pussy.

Spit drips from the corners of my mouth, trickling down my cheeks and my chin as Bane starts to straight up *fuck* my mouth. He grunts, dragging his fingers from my hair and wrapping his hand around his cock as he slides it out of my mouth with a wet pop.

I gasp, sucking in air and whimpering pathetically when he taps his cock against my lips. He growls as he starts to rub his heavy, thick dick all over my face, smearing spit and precum over my cheeks as he roughly fingers my drenched pussy.

And what’s truly fucked up? It doesn’t feel demeaning, or degrading.

Because I fucking *crave* this kind of sex.

The loss of control.

Pain.

Humiliation.

To be dominated, taken, and *fucked without mercy*.

So when he stokes his cock over my face, and slaps it against my mouth, and tells me what a good girl I'm being, I don't hate it.

I come *alive*.

The lewd, squelching sounds of his fingers ramming into my wet pussy fill the loft space, along with the equally sloppy sounds of his cock roughly fucking my mouth. Spit and precum is dripping freely down my chin and neck now, my body coiling and clenching and *wanting* as he fingers me harder and faster.

The vicious, snarling thing inside me coils tighter and tighter; snaking and winding around me until the air is squeezed from my lungs. His thumb rolls my clit again and again as his fingers curl deep, his cock ramming the back of my throat as my gags and moans blend.

Pleasure careens through me. Every muscle tightens, every nerve catches fire. My arms and legs strain against my bonds as my vision blurs at the edges.

Pressure swells, and swells, and fucking *swells* inside me. And then suddenly, it hits me like the wrath of an angry god splitting the heavens and cracking open the Earth.

Suddenly, for the second time ever that I can remember, *I'm fucking coming*.

I scream around Bane's cock, my entire body spasming and twisting and wrenching violently. My arms and ankles strain tight against the binds keeping them in place, my body arching off the bed against his muscled thighs. The wave crashes over me over and over again, and I'm lost in the damning sensation as growls and roughly fucks his swollen, bulging cock into my throat.

He's still fucking me with his fingers, and I'm still orgasming when he groans and tugs his thick, glistening cock from my mouth. He smears the head against my lips as he strokes once, twice, three times—

“Eyes on me, baby,” he growls. “Eyes on me while I paint this pretty face.”

Oh fuck.

The first thick, hot spurt of his cum erupts from his head, all over the bridge of my nose. His fingers plunge into me, dragging and yanking another wave of explosive pleasure from between my legs as a second thick rope of white cum lands on my cheek.

More cum splatters my mouth, my chin, my other cheek, my hair, my neck…

I moan like a depraved, needy *whore* when he grunts and shoves his cock back into my mouth. I’m mewling and whimpering eagerly, not even sure who I am right now as my tongue swirls over his thick head, greedily cleaning the cum from his cock as he strokes his fingers in and out of my hyper-sensitive pussy.

Bane slowly eases his cock from my mouth with a wet *plop*. His fierce, gorgeous dark eyes stay locked on mine as he uses the head of his cock to push his cum over my skin.

…Toward my mouth.

I let him. I *want him* to.

Eyes on me, baby.

My gaze stays locked with his, wild, unhinged ferocity churning between us as he scoops his cum from my face with his cock and feeds it to me.

He undoes the knots around my ankles, then my wrists, right before smearing his sticky, glistening cock over my mouth again.

“*Good girl*,” he murmurs. “You look so fucking pretty with my cum all over your mouth.”

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DOVE

SOMETHING EVIE SAID last night flickers through my mind first thing next morning.

Well, no. That's not actually true. The *first* thing that flickers through my mind is the delicious soreness between my legs.

The ache in my ankles and wrists.

The realization that my hair is still slightly damp, because I took a shower at two-thirty in the morning to wash the arousal from between my thighs and Bane's cum from my skin.

Part of me wants to pretend the whole thing was a viciously dark fantasy, straddling that dark gray area between dream and nightmare.

But that gray area is where I *thrive*.

Maybe someone whose head was less fucked up and whose libido was less black and broken might view what happened last night as a violation.

Assault, even.

But even when I lie to myself and try to cast him as the villain, I can't.

Because…if a villain ties you up and makes you moan and writhe and come while he uses you exactly like in your darkest fantasies…*is* he still the villain?

Mercifully, I'm almost positive Evie didn't hear a thing last night. This morning, she told me she slept like a baby in my "adorable" carriage house, thanked me again for trusting her with my secrets, and gave me a big hug.

Not a single hint of "also I heard you getting face-fucked by your venomously dark and villainous fiancé last night until you came like a hurricane".

I mean, this is *Evie* we're talking about.

If she'd heard anything, it'd be all over her face in lurid, living color.

After that, her brother's men, who I think might actually have spent the night in their SUV parked across the street from my dad's house, drove her home.

And now I'm alone with my thoughts.

Rehearsal whooshes by in a blur. It actually bothers me when I realize it's over, because ballet is my therapy. It's been the one constant in my life, through pain, torture, loss, the downward spiral into the darkness of addiction, and the clawing, nail-splitting climb back out of it.

The one saving grace of the rehearsal I'm barely mentally present for is that at the end, Madame Kuzmina, our ice-cold sadist of an artistic director, announces in front of the whole company that she's chosen me to dance the role of Giselle in our upcoming gala performance of excerpts from *Giselle*, *Carmen*, and *Don Quixote*.

That feels good. Especially when Milena, who I *know* was angling for the part, gives me a huge hug and earnestly tells me she's happy Kuzmina picked me.

But as I shower off in the changing rooms later, something that Evelina said last night is still percolating in my head: *"There's more to it than that? What do you remember about them dating?"*

Honestly, I *don't* remember anything about them dating. I know from pictures and what I've been told that they were together for almost three years. Bane was a junior when Lark and I arrived at Thornfield Prep as freshmen, and I guess they hit it off pretty quickly.

I’ve seen the photos of Scott and me before heading out to junior prom—me looking absolutely fucking ridiculous in my shimmery pop-star dress and Sex and the City blue Manolos. In one picture, you can see Lark and Bane, both all in black, lurking in the background.

Obviously *they* weren’t going to prom, because they were Mr. and Mrs. Anti-establishment.

I know—again, from what I’ve been told—that Bane proposed to Lark, two months before I got her killed.

But everything else is a blank.

No memories. No anecdotes. Just…nothing.

I'm still mulling that over when I decide to go to the garden behind the main house later that evening when I get home.

“Good evening, Dove.”

Melinda, my father’s housekeeper, is, predictably, her usual quiet, even-tempered self. It’s almost a zen-like thing, except she’s not at all a yoga type. It’s almost more like she’s *constantly* playing a background part on Downton Abbey as one of the staff. I mean, she tried calling me “Ms. Marchetti” when she first started, and it was endlessly amusing to Lark and me that she pointedly would *not* call her “Ms. Peltier”, since Lark was also “the help” in Melinda’s eyes.

Agatha, Lark's grandmother and our previous housekeeper, started showing signs of her emerging Alzheimer’s pretty early. It’s not like my dad kept her on out of the goodness of his heart: I think it was more a form of laziness, keeping her employed while Melinda slowly learned the position she wouldn’t assume for another six years.

When Agatha died in her sleep a week after Lark was buried, Melinda took over full-time as the Marchetti family housekeeper.

She’s great at her job. She’s just…not Agatha.

Lark’s grandmother is what you’d see if you were to imagine a stereotypical housekeeper: in her later years, round, cheerful and sharply witty. She was

basically Betty White from *Golden Girls*.

Melinda, on the other hand, is *maybe* forty, but has also had a ton of "work" done: lip fillers, Botox, I'm pretty sure a minor face lift, and *definitely* a boob job. She also prides herself on being very fashionable, even if she's dusting the library or cooking Dad some extravagant meal.

"Good evening, Melinda," I say with a smile.

Her brows pinch slightly as she stands backlit in the door to her quarters. Her eyes slide up to my pink hair for a minute, which I know she hates, before she refocuses on my face. "What can I do for you?"

"I, uh…have a bit of an odd question for you."

She frowns. "Yes?"

The garden apartment where Melinda lives is also where Lark and Agatha lived while they were still alive. It's a *huge* apartment by New York City standards, with three bedrooms, three full baths, a kitchen, a dining area, and a living room. The three of them were able to comfortably share it, put it that way.

I have vague flashbacks from that somber, nightmarish time after I was brought home, of men I didn't recognize just…clearing the space of most of Lark's and Agatha's things. The couch that Lark and I used to sit on while watching horror movies we were *way* too young for. The framed Basquiat print that hung in the dining room.

Weeks later, I was able to bring myself to go into Lark's room and pack up whatever was left. But it wasn't much. Just a few books, some vinyl records, and Boo, the little purple stuffed elephant she'd had on her bed since she was two.

But I'm not here tonight looking for mementos or memories. I'm looking for answers that back then I maybe didn't even know to look *for*.

I clear my throat and smile at Melinda. "I was wondering if you knew if any of the Peltiers' things were still stored here. Like, anything that the movers may have missed, or you packed up—"

“There are a few boxes in Agatha’s old room,” Melinda says crisply. “I…” Her usually calm demeanor breaks for a second as she glances down at the floor. “I wasn’t sure if they had any distant family who might come looking for…well…anything.”

She smiles a very tight, Botox smile and places a manicured hand on my arm.

“Come, I’ll show you.”

* * *

MY HEART STILLS.

The first three boxes I opened didn’t have anything by way of clues in them. Some old knitting supplies, a few cookbooks, clothes, trinkets. But when I get to the fourth box, I freeze.

“*Heartbreak*” is written in messy, jangled sharpie on the top of it. The B is backwards. I poke my head out of the room and catch Melinda’s eye as she sips a cup of tea in the kitchen.

“Find what you were looking for?” she asks politely.

“Do you know about this *heartbreak* box?”

Her face clouds. “Agatha,” she says quietly. “The poor thing packed it in a moment of lucidity a few days before she passed. I believe it’s some things from Lark’s room.” She winces. “I… I know how close you two were. I’m sorry, Dove.”

I bite back the bitterness in my mouth and smile tightly. “Thanks, Melinda.”

There’s not much in the box—some more records, Lark’s old bronze and green desk lamp that I remember so well, and a few photos of her and me that I remember being tacked to her wall. Those hit me hard.

But then I see it, and my breath catches.

Holy shit.

I remember the little blue book *vividly*, if for no other reason than it was the *one* part of herself that she kept hidden even from me.

Her diary.

A twinge ripples through me as I reach into the box for it, barely touching it, as if doing so would dishonor her even in death.

But I also want answers. I *need* answers when it comes to her and Bane. I have to know what I'm getting into with him.

Why he's so fixated on me, and why I both flinch from and ache for his rough, villainous touch.

The seconds tick by, my fingertips a hair's breadth away from the book, which she didn't share with *anyone*.

Fuck it.

I pluck the diary up, my heart racing as I walk over to the little built-in bench by the window that looks over the garden. Sitting, I open to a random entry, my pulse jangling as my eyes drop to the forbidden page.

> *Dear Boo,*

I can't help but grin to myself. It's *so* Lark that she addressed her diary entries not to "Dear Diary" but to the stuffed elephant that lived on her bed.

> *Dear Boo,*
>
> *Well, it happened (!!). You know I've been going around in circles about it for months, wondering if I was ready, or if I wanted to. But I decided I was, and I'm so fucking glad I did.*
>
> *Bane and I HAD SEX. I, Lark Peltier, am no longer a virgin!!!*

My heart plummets as I read the words. A horrible, gnawing, cancerous guilt snakes through me, twisting my insides.

Of all the fucking entries, *this* is the one I had to read, after what happened last night?

I'm a beyond horrible friend and I'm going to hell.

The lump in my throat just sits there, leaden, as I return my eyes to the page.

> *It was SO GOOD! I mean, it hurt, but just at first. And there wasn't really any blood THANK GOD. Bane was so cool about it all, too. I mean he was amazing before, and never once pushed for it, or begged, or anything. But when IT finally happened…holy FUCK.*
>
> *He's so hot (and big lol). And he made it sooooo good.*

I feel vile. Dirty.

> *I thought it would bother me more than it wasn't his first time. But it didn't. I wouldn't want it to have been any different, or with anyone else. He was perfect. Lol his DICK is perfect. I mean really really big, but soooo perfect. Fuck, I love him so much.*

Yeah, I'm officially a piece of shit.

For willingly engaging in what happened last night. For craving him. For *coming* for him. For marrying the man Lark was supposed to have her happy ever after with.

I'm so fucking sorry, I think, squeezing my eyes shut and picturing her face.

I close the diary. I'm about to drop it back into the box and promise myself never to pry into her past like that again. But something stops me. Instead, my pulse thudding heavily, I close the box back up.

And I keep the book.

"I found an old school notebook of Lark's," I lie for some reason to Melinda. "Do you mind if I…?"

She smiles politely. "Of course not. Anything you want—"

The loud, metallic buzzing of an alarm goes off, next to a little lightbulb on the kitchen wall under a brass placard that says, “Madame’s Dressing Room”.

Jesus Christ, I’d forgotten about these.

Speaking of *Downton Abbey*, these buzzers are a holdout from a century ago. They’re location-based “I need something” servant bells—one in the master bedroom, others in the dining room, study, and dressing room that Medusa, AKA Felicity spends so much of her time and my dad’s money in.

She’s recently decided she’s going to be a “mogul”, and has bought in—*hugely*, I gather—to this total pyramid scheme multi-level-marketing company called PetalGlow Essentials. Basically, she now sells scammy essential oils and yoga leggings—or, is *supposed* to be selling scammy essential oils and yoga leggings. So far, she just buys cases of them and then spends all day posting selfies of her and Chanel posing in front of them.

For all his prickishness, even Dad never used these fucking buzzer things, because they’re obnoxious and they reek of snobbery.

Unsurprisingly, Felicity, has absolutely *no problem* using them all the time. Honestly, the snobbery is probably a selling point for her. It also wouldn’t shock me if she’s currently buzzing for Melinda because she needs someone to film her latest TikTok dance.

Melinda’s usually calm demeanor flickers as her mouth sets.

Well, there’s one thing we have in common: complete and utter disdain for the newer-model Mrs. Marchetti.

“I must attend to Madame,” she says quietly, standing. “As I was saying… Anything you want from either of their room is yours, Dove.”

I smile at her. “Thanks, Melinda.”

Back in the carriage house, I change into pajamas and then nuke some leftover Thai takeout for dinner.

I really should learn to cook someday.

Once the Pad Thai is warmed up, I sit cross-legged on the couch with the bowl in my lap and Lark's diary in my free hand. I pack away my guilt and page back a few entries from her gushy recount of losing her virginity to the same fucking man I'm marrying.

Dear Boo,

I just want it to stop. Sometimes, it comes out of nowhere. I'm happy, and I'm fine, and everything is normal, and then IT comes. Like a shadow or a dark cloud moving across my thoughts.

I HATE IT.

I hate how it grabs onto me and doesn't let go. I hate how fucking crazy it makes me feel.

I don't even know what's real or not when it gets bad. I don't know who I can trust.

I don't know who I am.

I freeze, my fork halfway to my mouth as a cold shiver ripples down my spine.

What the fuck.

I know Lark had some issues, like me. But it was *way* less. She got anxious sometimes, or got mild seasonal depression. She could be a touch scatterbrained. But she took meds for the anxiety, and it was never that bad, from what I recall.

This paints another picture.

Why didn't I know she felt like this? Why didn't she ever tell me?

My heart twists. *Maybe she did, and I forgot*.

My eyes drop back to the page.

Sometimes I wake up screaming. I'm so scared of what's inside me.

I’m so scared of it taking over.

I just want it to stop. Please.

The wind starts to blow a little more angrily outside. Another chill ripples down my spine, and before I can stop myself, my eyes flick to the door, checking to make sure it’s locked.

It’s like the lingering anxious sensation you get after pausing an especially freaky part of a horror movie. You’re back in “the real world”, but the terror you just felt through the screen lingers, making you wonder if that chainsaw murder might be hiding in *your* closet, too.

I close the book shakily.

What the *fuck*.

How have I not remembered how bad Lark’s mental health was? Like, at all? Or is it not a memory thing, but a her thing? Was she just really good at masking this side of her, and hiding all this shit that she was apparently dealing with?

My insides knot as I set the Pad Thai I no longer have any stomach for on the coffee table, along with the diary.

I’m so scared of what’s inside me.

I’m so scared of it taking over.

I just want it to stop. Please.

I quickly head up to the loft to get ready for bed. Pajamas, teeth, meds, then I find myself starting haggardly at myself in the cold glare of the bathroom mirror.

Another anxious, shuddering shiver creeps down my spine.

What the fuck was inside my friend that made her so afraid?

And what’s inside me?

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DOVE

My dad always *insists* that his men drive me into Manhattan for ballet. But I always make them drop me off a few blocks away because I *hate* the idea of being chauffeured in a bullet-proof luxury SUV.

Bag slung over my shoulder, I start to walk the five blocks to the theater. As I do so, I set my guilt aside and open Lark's diary again.

> *Dear Boo,*
>
> *I found three dozen black roses in my locker when I opened it this morning at school. Like legit LOCKED INSIDE.*
>
> *God, I fucking love him.*

My heart wrenches a little as I turn onto Madison Avenue and start down the last two blocks to the Mercury. My eyes drop back to the page.

> *OMG, he spanked me last night!!! Like a LOT lol. And it was super fucking hot. Maybe that's why he got me the roses, like an apology. But we were both there, and we both know that I didn't need ANY sort of apology. He asked if I wanted to try it, and I did, and I got SO FUCKING WET. Like I was leaving a puddle on his jeans lol.*

A nauseous feeling curdles in my stomach for invading her privacy like this and snooping into her sex life.

For imaging the scene as she describes it, but with *me* over Bane's knee instead, soaking his pants as he spanks my ass.

What's wrong with me? I'm the worst best friend ever.

I think I might disgust myself.

The dark, familiar itch grins to life inside me. The gnawing, clawing, evil within me that whispers in my ear to do terrible things.

You want the needle. You crave that sweet escape.

You want to watch your blood seep out from your open flesh.

You want to jump and end it all.

I inhale sharply and then exhale slowly. Again. Again. Again.

My hands are shaking and my face is colorless as I reach the entrance to the alley that leads from Madison Avenue to the back door of the Mercury Theater and close the diary.

You don't need those things.

You aren't that person anymore.

You embrace life now.

I squirrel the book deep in my dance bag and take yet another cleansing breath before I walk down the alley and join the crowd already gathered there.

This is where the dancers tend to congregate before and sometimes after rehearsal. Brooklyn described it to me once, really well I thought, as an "in-between place": somewhere to stop, take a moment, and forget about life, bills, heartache, drama, and anything else that isn't dance before we enter that world.

Because inside that building, whether at the barre, in the practice studio, or on stage, the outside world doesn't matter.

We're just vessels for our passion and the mastery of our art.

It sounds flowery and overblown, but it's true. It’s why I fucking *love* ballet, which has brought me back from the edge—figuratively and literally—so many times.

“Good morning, *Giselle*,” Evie beams at me as I walk up to where she’s already chatting with Lyra, Naomi, and Val.

I roll my eyes, feeling my cheeks burn. “I don’t know. I think Madame is just testing it out—”

“Dude…” Naomi sighs, grinning. “I used to think this whole clueless thing was a bit.” She shakes her head. “But now I think it might actually be the real *you*.”

My brows pinch. “Huh?”

Lyra giggles. “She means you’re fucking *amazing*, lady. You do understand that, right?”

I groan, feeling my face burn even hotter. “We’re all—”

“Oh, for fucks sake,” Val snickers, exhaling heavily and taking a sip from the enormous coffee in his tattooed hand. Ever since he quit cigarettes, his caffeine intake has gone through the fucking roof.

Amusingly, I think it was the same for me for a while, after I left *Il Refugio* and decided I didn’t want my rehab smoking habit to follow me.

I force myself to smile at them.

To be normal.

To be someone without baggage and *with* memories of the past, unlike me.

“Thank you,” I finally say to Naomi, because I know that’s what they want to hear, what a person is expected to say to a compliment. Then I grin at her. “But *hello*, lady who’s going to be rocking Carmen herself in the Habanera?”

Naomi thanks everyone when they congratulate her. Madame Kuzmina hasn’t announced all the casting for the gala performance yet. But Naomi excitedly texted us on our “ballet bitches” group chat after we all left last

night to tell us that Madame had kept her late to offer her the coveted variation from *Carmen.*

It's funny. When I first got back to New York and joined the Zakharova, Naomi was a whole different person from the confident young woman standing in front of me now. She was shy and wholly unsure of herself. She also wouldn't in a million years have been given, even with her insane talent, the Habanera solo, which is unapologetically sexy and sensual. That just wasn't her.

Now, there's zero doubt in my mind that she's going to kill it, and leave that stage on fire when she's done.

…I think it's probably safe to say that Naomi's newfound confidence in herself, her body, and her femininity is all due to Nico Barone, her boyfriend-who-I'm-guessing-will-be-her-fiancé-soon.

Nico, who *also* happens to be buddies with a certain dark shadow I keep seeing in my peripheral vision.

The shadow that haunts my dreams and then *wakes me from them* with his rough touch and vicious brand of pleasure and pain.

He spanked me last night.

I was leaving a puddle on his jeans lol.

God, I fucking love him.

My chest constricts, that sick feeling tightening in my stomach again.

"Hey, where are Brooklyn and Milena?" Evie chirps, glancing at the dainty silver watch on her wrist.

Shit. I forgot.

"Fuck, sorry," I mumble. "Brooklyn messaged me earlier that she was running late this morning."

"*Right*," Val says wickedly, shoving tattooed fingers through his shaggy dark hair. "That's one way to say 'getting fucked bowlegged by BDE while he reads the *Wall Street Journal*."

The rest of us crack up as Evie turns bright red and looks like she wants to melt into the ground. At least she also laughs.

“BDE” is Val’s nickname for Kir, Brooklyn’s boyfriend. As in “big dick energy.”

I mean, it's not *inaccurate*.

The group gabbing, smoking, stretching, and drinking coffee out back breaks up as we realize the time. Someone opens the back door, and everyone’s filing inside *just* as Milena comes rushing up, hefting her dance bag back onto her shoulder.

“Sorry!” she blurts as she crashes into our little group, a wild grin on her flushed face. “I was on my way out the door and totally forgot I had to—”

“Yeah, whatever bullshit you spent the whole drive here concocting in your pretty head, Ms. Thang,” Val snickers, “you can save it for another day.”

Milena’s brows furrow. “I don’t know what—”

Lyra bursts out laughing. “Girl, those hickeys are *fresh*.”

The rest of us, even Milena, crack up as we all head inside.

Brooklyn manages to sprint onto stage *just* in time. Then it’s immediately into morning class, then into smaller groups. Madame pulls Naomi and me aside to have us start working on our stuff for the gala. Naomi skips over to the far side of the stage to start warming up for her *Carmen* solo, and I move to the other wing to become Giselle, the innocent young peasant girl who goes mad and ultimately dies of a broken heart.

Except, as I start working, a weight settles on my chest.

There’s nothing innocent about me.

I’m fucking around with my dead best friend's great love. That makes me *horrible*.

I repeat the steps over and over to commit them to muscle memory. When I take a breather, movement near the back of the stage catches my eye. I turn

and watch Milena dance for a moment, and then a stabbing sensation sinks into me.

What. The. *Fuck*.

Milena isn't just dancing. She's dancing the very steps from Giselle's Mad Scene that I've just been working on.

And she's doing them *for Madame Kuzmina*.

I watch her move through one of the transitions flawlessly before she stops facing our director. Madame beams at her—fucking *beams*, which believe me is like seeing an actual fucking Martian walking down 5th Avenue with a Saks shopping bag. She nods at Milena encouragingly as the willowy blonde gets into starting position and begins the scene again.

What the FUCK?!

I know rivalries exist in the ballet world, even between friends. But Madame gave *me* that part right in front of everyone. And Milena fucking *hugged me* and told me how glad she was for me.

And here she is, wowing our director with moves she has clearly worked on.

Obviously angling for my fucking spot.

Something unhinged and cold takes hold of me. My eyes narrow murderously. My lips curl. My pulse becomes erratic, and I don't even realize I'm storming toward Milena and Madame Kuzmina until Brooklyn suddenly materializes in front of me and grabs my upper arm.

"Whoa! Hang on, lady!" she hisses, tightening her grip on my arm and yanking me around, spinning me away from the two of them before she frowns deeply and peers into my face. "Dude, are you okay?"

Anger curls inside me as I struggle to form words.

"I—she—" I swallow, shaking my head. "*What the fuck is she doing*?!" I finally snarl, my chest rising and falling. Sweat sheens my back and my forehead as my brows knit tightly.

Brooklyn looks puzzled as she glances past me.

“Madame asked Milena to be your understudy. She…has to know the steps?” She peers at me again, her eyes narrowing in concern.

I purse my lips. “*When*? When the hell did this happen?!”

“Dove, she announced it at the start of rehearsal today.“ She looks at me, concern written all over her face. “You were literally standing next to me.”

I blink, then blink again. Wordlessly, I turn, my chest still heaving quickly as I glance back to where Milena is working one of the transitions again. She stops, sees me watching her, and beams as she waves.

“Hey, don’t get sick or anything!” she shouts over the cacophony of the studio. “There’s no way I would nail this like you're going to!”

What the fuck is happening.

I feel numb as I manage to smile weakly back at Milena and then turn to face Brooklyn. She’s frowning at me again, looking very worried.

“Hey… Is everything okay?” Brooklyn says gently, still peering at me. “I mean, I get that there’s a lot of pressure right now, with the whole Bane thing. You want to like, sit for a sec? You look kinda—”

“I’m fine,” I mumble, forcing a wry smile. “I just…didn’t sleep great last night.” I force the fake smile on my face a little wider. “Should have had a second coffee this morning, I guess.”

“Ugh, I *hate* when I don’t sleep enough,” Brooklyn sighs. “Makes me all crazy feeling.” She glances at me again. “You’re okay, then?”

“Yeah, for sure.” I smile again, tapping my head. “Just going nuts. No biggie.”

She giggles. “Well, at least you'll be in character, Giselle.”

I swallow uncomfortably as she walks away.

What the *fuck*?

* * *

I DO MANAGE to keep it together enough to finish rehearsal. But after I've showered and changed, I pull the diary back out of my bag and read it as I walk to where I usually meet Dad's guys in the Escalade.

Dear Boo,

I'm scared.

My brow furrows as I re-read the opening line, threading my way up Madison Avenue through the thick crowd of people around me.

Scared? Of what? I glance at the top of the page and realize the entry is dated just a few weeks before she died.

I can't tell anyone. Let's be real, who's going to believe me? Not Grandma, of course. I'd tell Dove, but we're so distant these days.

My heart sinks. We were *distant*? When the fuck were Lark and I *ever* anything except glued at the hip?

Maybe once upon a time, she'd have believed me, but not now. I think part of it is the Bane thing. I wish I could talk to her about that, too. But it's too weird to ask her that to her face. I think she'd take it the wrong way or get angry.

I know, I know. I should just say it. She's my best friend. Or WAS. I hope she still is. I miss how we were. I really miss having someone to talk to about all this.

I think something bad is going to happen to me. I can feel it, like when the birds go quiet right before a storm.

I figured out his secret.

I think he knows.

I blink away tears, my breath turning ragged as my heart hammers in my chest. I swallow a lump in my throat, navigating the thick crowd of rush hour pedestrians around me as my eyes return to the words on the page.

I think he might try to hurt me.

I think he's going to kill me, Boo.

Reality itself screeches to a stop around me. My throat closes off, my pulse thumping an off-kilter, staccato beat as a whining roar fills my ears.

I think he's going to kill me, Boo.

My hands are shaking as I slam the diary shut and jam it into the side pocket of my dance bag. Numb, cold, and trembling, I stutter to a stop at the curb, waiting for the walk light as evening traffic zooms by.

I figured out his secret.

I think he knows.

I think he might try to hurt me.

I think he's going to kill me, Boo.

The crossing light is still an orange hand so I reach for the diary again, wanting to re-read whatever the *fuck* that was so I can wrap my head around it all.

I never get the chance.

Strong hands slam into me from behind, shoving me forward. The scream catches in my throat, my eyes wide with horror as I find myself lurching off the curb and right into East 52nd Street.

I don't see the bus until it's two feet away.

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16

BANE

PULSING energy jangles within me as I storm through the hospital like a wraith.

Where the *fuck* is she.

You'd think, given my grim expression and the way I shove people out of my way like an ice-barge demolishing a frozen stream, that I was feeling how most people do when they come to a hospital looking for a loved one.

Anxious. Terrified. Strangled by worry about someone lying broken or bleeding behind one of these doors.

But the heated blood under my skin right now can more accurately be ascribed to *anger*.

Fury, even.

I round a corner, and I'm instantly mobbed by big Italian guys in dark suits with obvious firearms under their jackets, blocking me like a wall.

"Calm the fuck down!" a familiar gruff voice barks from behind the Great Wall of Pasta. "It's Antonov, ya dumb fucks."

The jowly fucker I've just squared right up with, our foreheads almost touching, scowls before he blinks in recognition.

"Let him *through*, Joey!"

“Move, *Joey*,” I hiss quietly. His dim-witted eyes narrow, but he and the other Marchetti goons step aside. I shove past them and stop in front of Cesare.

Instantly he’s all smiles, grinning widely as he pats me on the shoulder.

“I know what you’re thinking,” he laughs, “and don’t you fuckin’ worry. We’re all good. Our deal is still fine.”

My brows furrow.

“The second I heard you were on the way over,” Cesare grins at me, patting a heavy hand on my chest like we’re old buddies, “I figured you and your father were anxious to make sure everything was still in order. Trust me, the deal is still okay.”

I stare at him.

The deal.

Jesus Christ.

This fucker is not concerned right now about the fact that his daughter just got hit by a fucking *bus*—well, *bumped* by a bus that stopped just in time, but still.

He's concerned about our goddamn deal.

Father of the fucking year.

“How is she,” I growl under my breath.

“Like I said,” he grins. “All good.”

“Aside from being hit by a bus?” I mutter.

He chuckles. “Well, yeah, there's that. But she’s fine.”

I crack my neck to either side, still glowering at him.

“Is she watched?”

Cesare frowns. “Huh?”

“My fiancée,” I growl. “Do you have her shadowed by your men when she’s out.”

His heavy brows shoot up. “She’s family! My guys are on top of these things! You think I don’t look after my own daughter?”

“I think she was just pushed in front of a goddamn bus, and EMT’s got through midtown rush hour traffic and brought her to hospital before any of *your guys* even fucking knew about it.”

Silence descends over the hallway. Cesare looks at me like I’ve got two heads.

Shitty father or not, this *is* still Don Marchetti, a major player in the city who has the support of some of the biggest families in the Italian Commission.

He's not exactly used to being mouthed off to.

I suppose I could backtrack or make him believe my tone is out of concern for his daughter. Instead, I just bulldoze right ahead. Cesare’s a fucking bully who was given a crown, and there’s only one way to deal with thugs like him.

“I’ll be taking her to my place,” I say evenly. “She’ll live with me from now on.”

Cesare bristles. But not as much as he fucking should.

“You haven’t married her yet, Antonov,” he grunts. I don’t reply, and his brow furrows deeper. “Look, the optics—”

“*Fuck* the optics,” I say coldly. “Someone pushed her in front of a city bus. Obviously your men can’t handle her security.”

I can feel the lethal stares of his men burning into my back. Cesare cocks a brow at me, his teeth grinding.

“This isn’t a negotiation, by the way,” I add, leaning subtly closer to him. “Our marriage is the cement in the deal between our families. And *your men*,” I say, turning to smile coldly at the scowling, pissed-off guards

behind me, “don’t seem to be up to the task of keeping one of the parties safe. *I* am.”

Cesare glares at me. My expression is icy as I stare right back.

“Fine,” he finally grunts. “She’s with you now. Just…keep it on the down—”

“Where is she.”

He scowls with all the indignation of a man whose is *not* used to being interrupted. But he nods his chin past me to the hospital room door across the hall. “Inside, with her sister.”

Both women gasp when I stride inside the room. Chiara looks surprised, but the expression on my bride-to-be’s face is more…

I frown.

She legit looks *afraid* of me.

“Chiara,” I growl under my breath, nodding to her.

We have that weird kind of relationship where we don’t really know each other that well, despite having been *around* each other at least a few dozen times. Of course, back then, she was a kid when I’d come over to the Marchetti house to see Lark. And I was just the housekeeper's granddaughter’s emo freak boyfriend.

She nods back. “Bane.”

“I need to have a word with my fiancée,” I add.

I know they’re not close, and never really have been. But, bottom line, Chiara is in here with her. Cesare is *not*.

You can’t pick your family. But showing up counts for a lot.

Chiara glances at her sister. Her face pales, and I don’t miss the subtle shake of her head as if she’s silently screaming “no”.

Chiara frowns as she glances at me again. “Maybe you could come back—”

“It wasn’t a request, Chiara,” I growl.

Her throat bobs, then she clears her throat. “I’ll, uh…I’ll be outside with Dad.”

She shoots me a furtive glance as she quickly walks past me and out the door.

I stride over to the bed. “Can you walk?”

“I—yes. The bus only bumped me, thank—”

“Good. Let’s go.”

She stares at me. “What?”

“You’re coming home with me.”

Her face darkens. “The hell I am.”

She gasps sharply as I yank the bedsheets back.

“You’re either walking out of here with me, or else I’m throwing you over my shoulder and *carrying* you.” My eyes stab into hers. “Your choice, little bird. And we both know I’m not bluffing.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you,” she breathes, glaring death at me, her voice tinged with something I can’t place.

“Suit yourself—”

“Okay! Okay!” She stops me just as I reach for her.

Five minutes later, once she’s dressed, I’m escorting her past Cesare and his men and bringing her outside to my car.

“Bane.”

Sergey, one of my top guys, is waiting by the car when we get there. I help my *completely* unappreciative fiancée into the passenger seat and then close the door before I beckon Sergey around to the back of the car.

“What’d you find?”

He holds up a folder. “Police report, taken at the scene while the EMTs were checking her out.”

“And?”

His brows furrows. “The bus driver claims he didn’t see who pushed Dove. None of the interviewed witnesses did, either.”

The niggling little spark of suspicion in my head blossoms into a flame.

She’s silent the whole drive back to my place, turned away from me and staring numbly out the window at the neon lights of the city whizzing past. It only dumps even more fuel on that fire crackling and snarling inside me.

When we get back to my building, I’m a wall of cold, silent fury as I all but drag her out of the car and inside. I’m aware of her glancing at me, a fifty-fifty mix of nervous and pissed off. I don’t say a goddamn word the whole elevator ride up, and open the front door in silence.

“What are you—*hey!* Get the fuck off me!”

I ignore her curses and attempts to hit me as I drag her into and through the penthouse. When she plants her feet, I turn and grab her around the waist, throw her over my shoulder, and carry her to the master bathroom.

I kick on the hot water tap in the big gothic clawfoot tub, ignoring the way she kicks and writhes as she tries to squirm free. She gasps sharply when I abruptly swing her off my shoulder, pin her to the wall, and wrap a strong hand around her throat.

She struggles, hissing and swearing at me furiously. But again, I ignore the slaps and punches as I grab a fistful of her yoga pants and start to yank them down off her hips.

“*Excuse me*?!” she blurts, trying to kick me and jerk out of my grip.

Not happening.

I yank again, peeling them over her ass and starting to rip them down her thighs.

“Get your fucking hands off me!!”

“I would, but I don't trust you to do this yourself,” I growl. “Now stay the fuck still so I can—”

“Let me go!!”

She squeals and thrashes and writhes, kicking and lashing out as I deftly pull the yoga pants down to her knees and then try to shove her t-shirt up her torso.

“Stop—!”

“It’s nothing I haven’t seen before, little bird,” I sigh in a bored tone.

Her dark eyes burn into mine. I pause just long enough to draw in a breath, then slowly exhale as I glare back at her. “Would you *like* to do it yourself?”

“I’d like to stab you in the eye, actua—*Bane!*”

She claws and hits at me as I shove her t-shirt up over her breasts and grab the front of the sports bra underneath.

“Okay!!” she finally yells. “Okay! Jesus! I’ll do it!”

I hold her firmly for another second, eying her. Behind me, the tub fills with hot water, the steam curling around us as it fills the tiled bathroom.

“What are you even doing?!” she asks.

“Giving you a bath,” I grunt. “You were hit by a fucking bus and lying in the middle of East 52nd Street, then in a hospital bed.”

“Spoiler: I’m capable of bathing myself just fine,” she snaps, trying to wrestle out of my grip while simultaneously attempting to shove her shirt back down.

“I’m not sure I believe you,” I hiss back.

Her brows knit deeply. “*What*?”

“I haven’t had time to safety-proof the bathroom,” I growl. “So no, you will not be bathing alone yet. Not take off your fucking clothes or *I will*. I’ll count to three. One. Two—”

“Fuck you.”

I allow her to wriggle free but stay right where I am, watching her closely as she half turns. She pulls her clothes off and stays turned away from me, her arms crossed over her nakedness, her cheeks heating red.

“There, happy?” she mumbles. “Now can you *please* let me bathe my—”

“No. After your little stunt tonight, I don’t trust you alone in here until I’ve made sure there’s nothing you can use to harm yourself.”

She seems to forget all her bashfulness and any fear she had of me earlier as she whirls to stare pure daggers at me.

“*Fuck you—*”

She gasps, shuddering as I surge into her. My hand jerks out, wrapping tightly around her throat and pinning her against the wall at her back as steam curls around us.

“Let’s get one thing straight,” I hiss. “You belong to *me* now. You’re *mine*. And nobody gets to hurt what’s *mine*. That very-fucking-much includes you.”

She stares at me, her eyes wide and her mouth open. Then her stare turns lethal as she curls her lip at me.

“Asshole!” she snarls in my face. “You think I…what, threw myself into traffic?! I was *pushed*, dickhead!!” she screams. “Someone fucking—”

“The bus driver didn’t see anyone push you,” I reply evenly. “Nor did anyone else interviewed at the scene.”

She stares at me, her mouth hanging open. “You think I did it *myself*?!”

“I think until you can prove otherwise, you don’t get any privacy. Now get. In. The fucking. Tub.”

I turn and crank the tap off, steam curling off the rippling surface of the water.

“I was *pushed*, Bane!!” she snaps at my back.

I turn to her, calmly lifting a shoulder. “So you keep saying.”

She stares at me. “You’re *unwell*.”

“Said the pot to the kettle—”

I should see it coming. But, as cool as I’m trying to play it right now, I’m too distracted by the view of her perfect, creamy breasts with their soft, light pink nipples to anticipate the slap. Her palm cracks hard across my face, snapping my head to the side.

The bathroom goes utterly silent.

Her face is white as I slowly turn back to level my gaze at her. She swallows heavily, her eyes widening. “I…I didn’t mean to—”

She yelps when I roughly grab her, sit myself on the edge of the tub, and yank her down over my lap. She squirms and bucks, trying to get up. But my hand wraps tight around the back of her neck, keeping her pinned across my knees, her breasts against one thigh and her stomach on the other.

Without any sort of preamble, I wind my hand back and bring it down *hard* on her tight, upturned ass.

“*Fuck!!*”

She squeals, her spine jerking as my palm cracks across her bare skin. I do it again to the other cheek, smacking with a firm palm, the sound echoing loudly through the bathroom.

“You fucking ass—*AHHH!*”

Darkness twists inside me when her broken, achy, needy cries hum through my ears. My hand tangles in her hair, tugging her head back and forcing her to look straight ahead at the full-length mirror on the wall in front of her. Her back arches slightly, which pushes her ass up in the air, as if the more she protests and fights me, the more she actually wants this.

My palm cracks down again, turning the tight globe of her ass pink as the blood rushes to the surface. I spank the other cheek, then the first again, then back to the second. My dick pulses and twitches against her stomach

as I spank her over and over, groaning when I feel her body tightening against me.

I can feel her pussy hot against my thigh as I wind back and spank her yet again. She's still whimpering and writhing when my hand forces itself between her legs, cupping her needy little cunt.

She's fucking *soaked*.

I knew she would be. She gets off on this sort of treatment.

Pain. Humiliation. A loss of control.

I spank her ass twice more before I slide my hand back between her legs. This time she moans, whimpering with need as I drag two thick fingers along her messy little pussy.

"*No*—!"

"You're fucking *mine* now, little bird," I hiss venomously, silencing her weak protests. She squeals when I roughly ram two fingers inside her, groaning when I feel how fucking wet she is. I give her hair another tug, yanking her head back.

"*You can't*—"

My harsh, cold laugh cuts her off.

"I'll do whatever I want, *baby*," I rasp into her ear. She shudders, her tits rubbing against my thigh as her breath turns ragged and halting. "I could point out that you agreed to this," I growl. My fingers plunge deep into her tight little cunt, her slick walls squeezing the blood from them.

My hand uncoils from her hair and reaches down to her butt. Brutally hard smacks echo through the bathroom as I give her ass three quick cracks.

"But more importantly," I groan as she squeals and cries out beneath me, my fingers sinking into her, "the messy, drippy state of this greedy little hole tells me you *love* being my little fuck toy. My eager little *pain slut*."

My hand crashes down on her bright red ass, two of my fingers reaming in and out of her greedy pussy. Wet, squelching sounds fill the bathroom,

mixed with her aching, desperate little moans that I *know* she's trying to subdue.

Trying, and failing.

She's still telling herself she shouldn't want this. That she doesn't crave this sort of touch.

But I've peered into every dark secret she has, opened every cupboard and looked under every floorboard. I know what's behind every curtain, and where every fucking body is buried.

We haven't even begun to scratch the surface of things she thinks she shouldn't want but secretly yearns for.

My pulse thumps erratically in my veins as I grip her ass tightly. My fingers curl deep in her wet, needy cunt, stroking in and out as my other hand comes down repeatedly on her bright red butt.

"You belong to *me* now," I snarl, my cock pulsing against her stomach as she wriggles and arches against me. My fingers ram into her dripping pussy, scissoring inside her as she makes a mess of my hand. "And you *do not* get to hurt or take away what's *mine*," I bark coldly. "Do you fucking understand?"

She chokes out an unintelligible moan, nodding her head as her hair cascades over her face.

I sink a third finger into her, loving the way she jerks and quivers; the way her hot pussy clenches so fucking tight around my thrusting fingers. I bring my palm down yet again, spanking her ass *raw*.

"*Bane!!*"

A broken, aching cry wrenches from her throat. The muscles of her back coil and tighten, her spine snapping straight as her legs kick, her toes curling and scraping against the floor. Her walls clench down tight around my invading fingers, squeezing the fuck out of them as she lets out a shattered scream.

I don’t slow down. I just keep finger-fucking her as she writhes and shrieks and comes all over my fingers.

Finally, I slow to a stop. But I keep my fingers deep inside her as I bring my palm down one last time across her bright red, tenderized ass, already bruising.

She whimpers, her voice breaking sweetly as she trembles and shakes in my lap. Slowly, I drag my slick, glistening fingers from her pink cunt. I scoop her up, feeling the way she quivers against me before I lower her into the tub.

The tension melts from her face. Suddenly, I cup her jaw firmly, lifting her chin and forcing her to look me in the eye.

“Open.”

She blushes, her eyes wide, as if she can’t quite believe what just happened. Then they lock with mine as she slowly opens her mouth.

My fingers glide over her tongue. Her face heats, and I know she can taste herself as I swirl my fingertips over it.

“I'll make this very clear, little bird,” I growl. I cup her jaw again, tracing a finger over her lips as our gazes lock. “You don’t get to take yourself away from me.”

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17

DOVE

SOMETHING IS SERIOUSLY wrong with me.

Understatement of the fucking century.

It’s not just the particularly violent and aggressive flavor of sex that I gravitate to, either. If it was just that, I could forgive myself or at least give myself a little grace there.

As dark as my kinks are, I’m not the only one in the world who has them. *Lots* of people gravitate to free use, or CNC, or rape play. A lot of women who went through the sort of trauma I did, or far worse, will actively seek those sorts of fantasies out.

One of my therapists told me it’s a way for people to relive their trauma in a controlled way. It’s why safe words exist. Why “consensual” comes before “non-consent” in that particular kink.

So no, I don't think I’m broken because I want *far* from vanilla things in the bedroom.

I think I’m broken because of *who* I’ve chosen as a partner. Out of all the people in the world, with Tinder, or FetLife, or any of the other dozens of other options out there, I’ve ended up exploring them with *Bane*.

I could say that he’s forcing me; that he *made me* sign our fucking contract under pain of ruining my life. But after spilling my guts to Evelina the other night, that threat isn't so scary anymore.

I know I could end this. I could give Bane the finger, sit down with my friends, and empty my veins. Would it be hard to uncover those parts of myself to them?

Definitely.

But it would render Bane's threats moot. I'd be free of him.

And yet, here I am. Not telling anyone. Moving into his house.

Submitting to the man who was in love with my best friend, who took her virginity and used to touch her the *same fucking way* he touched me last night, putting me over his knee in the bathroom and spanking me while I watched myself in the mirror, face crumpled with raw need as I came on his fingers.

"He spanked me last night. Like a LOT lol. And it was super fucking hot."

Lark's teenage-hormone-soaked diary entry has been echoing in my head all day. Because Bane did *the exact same thing* to me last night.

Darkness coils inside me.

Shamefully, in some extremely fucked-up way, part of me wonders if that was one of the reasons I came so hard.

I exhale as I sink into one of the chairs by the window, sipping my coffee. After what happened last night in what I'm sure was Bane's quarters, he led me down the hall to a slightly smaller bedroom and announced this was where I'd be living.

Then he thrust an oversized t-shirt and a huge pair of sweatpants that both smell like him at me, and that was that.

At least we aren't sharing a room.

Also, I'm not *locked* inside my new room or anything, thank fuck, so I've been able to roam the two-level penthouse totally unhindered this morning. In fact, I don't think Bane's been home at all. I almost wondered if I had the place to myself, but then I walked into the kitchen and almost screamed at the man in a dress shirt cooking eggs at the stove.

Alfred, who I guess is also the cook and maybe Bane's housekeeper as well as the butler. I still can’t quite believe that a guy who dresses all in black, with a voice like a dark anti-hero and who lives basically in a gothic cathedral, has a butler named *Alfred*.

I politely declined Alfred’s offer of breakfast. But I did take him up on coffee, which I drank slowly while I explored the dark opulence of the penthouse. But now here I am, back in “my room”, wondering what the hell to do with myself. There’s no rehearsal today, so I'm at a loose end.

I jolt, almost spilling my coffee when the door to my room opens. Bane steps in, wearing a suit instead of his usual uniform of black jeans and black t-shirt.

Jesus.

The charcoal-gray suit fits him *perfectly*, from the hems of his trousers sitting precisely on the dark brown polished dress shoes, which match the belt, to the tailored jacket over a crisp white dress shirt.

He’s clean shaven, and when he breezes into the room, I get a whiff of woodsmoke and leather, so damn masculine that it makes my pulse quicken.

“Enjoying your morning,” he says evenly.

I nod. “Uh…yeah. I was kind of surprised there wasn’t a lock on my door.”

He frowns. “You’re not a prisoner.”

“Does that mean I can move back home?”

He tips his head slightly to the side as the seconds of silence tick by.

“No.” He turns toward movement outside the room. “In here, gentlemen.”

He steps aside, and a couple of men in moving company jumpsuits start coming into my bedroom carrying boxes, a familiar side table, a mirror…

What the fuck.

“Those are mine,” I blurt in alarm, standing up.

Bane looks over at me with an *almost* amused expression on his cold, beautiful face. “Of course they are.”

Right.

Because *I live here now*.

“You packed up the carriage house?”

“Were you planning on commuting to Brooklyn Heights every morning to brush your teeth?”

I give him a fake smile, ignoring the way his jaw tightens when I do.

Something I’m quickly learning is that Mr. Dry Sarcastic Biting Comments can dish it out, but gets all butt-hurt when you dish it back. I’ve filed that away as Very Useful Information.

When the moving guys finally finish stacking the neatly labeled boxes along the wall near the door to the walk-in closet, my brows knit.

“Wait,” I say, eyes running over the collection of things. “This isn’t everything.”

Bane cocks a brow. “It is. Your stepmother let the movers in and supervised while they boxed everything up.”

Fuck you, Felicity.

“I didn’t even realize she had a key,” I groan. “She must have taken all my painting stuff before she let the movers in.”

Bane’s brow furrows. “You…dance.”

“I paint, too,” I sigh with exasperation. “And none of my stuff is here.”

Bane is silent as he strokes a tattooed hand over his razor-sharp jawline. “I’ll look into it.” He clears his throat and reaches into his inside jacket pocket to pull out a folded paper. He sets it on top of one of the towers of boxes.

“What’s that?” I ask, puzzled.

“A reminder.”

I walk over and pick it up. I open it, and feel my face heat when my eyes land on the bold-font line at the top.

Contract of consent to physical and sexual activity between Bane Antonov and Dove Marchetti.

My eyes flick to Bane’s, and I shiver when I see the dark, slightly amused, hungry look in his gaze.

“I don’t need to be reminded of our agreement,” I hear myself snap as my pulse hammers in my veins. “I’m well aware of what living here entails.” I glare at him defiantly over the top of the page in my hands.

Bane just flashes a cold, venomous, predatory smile.

“*Not yet, you’re not*.”

Without another word, he turns and strides from the room, closing the door behind him and leaving me with goose-bumped skin and trembling hands.

Not yet, you’re not.

The fuck does that even mean?

When I signed the fucking thing, I expected Bane would have me sleep with him. Obviously. I think part of me was even willing to. For all that he's a monster, he’s not exactly unattractive.

He’s tall, in insane shape, with a honed, muscled body covered in tattoos. I’ve met his father, Nikolai Antonov, and he’s a very good-looking man himself. But Bane’s mother must have been a model or something, because Bane is just…

It’s a little unbelievable just how fucking attractive he is, from a purely physical standpoint. High cheekbones. That razor jawline. Perfect lips. Intensely dark, deep-set eyes with thick, masculine brows.

I shiver, shaking the thoughts of Bane’s physical attractiveness from my head.

Bottom line, I’ve been expecting I'd have to sleep with him, but I signed that contract more than a week ago, and it hasn’t happened yet.

Other things have. Like last night, for example. But spanking me and fingering me into oblivion isn’t the same as Bane *fucking* me.

And the problem is, the more I think about it, the more I find myself groaning at myself because I'm *frustrated* that he hasn’t yet.

Like, what the *fuck*, self? Do I actually *want him* to fuck me?

No. Obviously. For all of the reasons, but mainly the one spelled L-A-R-K.

But the longer things stretch out with this…*thing* hanging over me, the more it creeps into my thoughts. Tap-tap-tapping at the windows of my reality. Lingering in the shadows as I'm trying to fall asleep.

It’s like waiting for a jump-scare in a movie that doesn’t come, and my nerves are *shot*.

And *that’s* why I find myself walking through the penthouse toward Bane’s home office, which I found earlier while I was skulking around.

I open the door without knocking, because apparently that’s not a thing we do in this house. Bane’s eyes snap to mine as he looks up from his desk, his phone to his ear and a black expression etched across his very, very angry face.

Shit.

He barks something in Russian brusquely into the phone. I quickly turn to leave, realizing what an enormous mistake I’ve made barging in here. But as my fingers touch the knob, his voice slices through the room.

“Stop right there, little bird.”

A dark, ominous sensation ripples up my spine, wrapping like claws around my nape and keeping me pinned where I am. I shiver as I glance back, seeing his phone lying on his desk with the mute button now lit up.

I swallow nervously when Bane lifts his hand and crooks a finger at me.

“Come here.”

“It's okay, I can see you’re busy with—”

“*Come*. *Here*.”

The words drop from his lips like a tiger’s purred growl. My core tightens, my pulse skipping as I slowly walk across the room toward him.

“What did you need,” he murmurs.

I stop a few feet away from him and shake my head. “Nothing.”

Bane’s eyes pierce into mine. He remains quiet, but I can *feel* the black energy rolling off him and ensnaring my ankles, stopping me from turning and running.

“Nothing. Really,” I stammer.

He still doesn't speak, just slowly stands from his desk. My breath catches as he towers over me, dark eyes stabbing into mine. He raises his hand, and beckons me again with two fingers.

“Stand here,” he growls, twisting his hand so that his fingers now point to a spot on the floor directly in front of him, to the side of his desk.

Not a fucking chance.

“You’re on a call,” I mumble. “I’ll come back—”

One second, he’s still a few feet away. The next, he’s surging across the floor, grabbing me, bending me over, and pinning me face-down across his desk, a firm hand on the back of my neck.

I’m shaking, my breath coming in short, sharp bursts. Bane reaches over and unmutes his phone.

With his other hand, he grabs the back of my yoga pants and yanks them down over my ass. Heat tingles over my skin as he continues his phone conversation in Russian. His fingers slip into the back of my thong, and I shudder when he slowly peels it down and off me before letting it tangle with my yoga pants mid-thigh.

He continues to speak in a rough, somewhat angry voice. My body tenses, my heart thudding as I wait for the jump-scare that *still* doesn’t materialize.

Mid-sentence, I suddenly yelp loudly when his hand smacks my ass, still tender and brutalized from last night.

Bane's thick finger stabs the mute button. I hear multiple other men speaking in Russian as Bane winds up and roughly spanks me again.

One cheek. Then the other. Then back to the first. I cry out, squealing at each vicious smack. I spasm, shuddering when he roughly hits the inside of my thigh, forcing my legs a little wider apart as I lean across his desk. He stabs the mute button again, barking what sounds like orders into the phone.

The next second, his hand comes up between my thighs and *slaps my fucking pussy again*.

He hits the mute button *just* in time to stop my broken, savage, fucked-up screams of pleasure from reaching the men on the other end of the call.

"*Now tell me what the fuck you came in here for, little bird*," he rasps into my ear, sending a tremor down my spine.

I pant as my legs shake, my core turning molten. "I—the contract—"

"*What about it*," he murmurs right into the shell of my ear. His hand stays on my ass, softly stroking the red, smarting flesh.

"I…all the things I agreed to on the list…"

Bane starts to chuckle. "You're wondering why I haven't *fucked you* yet?"

I go still, not daring to contradict him.

Bane exhales slowly. His hand grips my bare ass tightly, and I shiver as I feel him lean over me, his lips brushing my ear.

"Don't worry, little bird," he rasps. "I *will* fuck you. But you and I both know it's not as *fun* without an element of danger. Of fear. Of *surprise*. So when I do fuck you, it's going to be when you least expect it. I don't want to be *served* my meal of you," he continues. "I want your adrenaline *screaming through your system* when I force you to your knees to take my cock."

Holy fuck.

I almost tell him my adrenaline is through the fucking roof *right now*. But I just keep trembling, the hard wood of the desk biting into my hipbones as he keeps me pinned prone across his desk.

“Now,” he growls. “Me not knocking on your door is because it’s my fucking house. That privilege doesn’t extend to you. This is my office, and *that*”…he taps the side of his phone on the desk next to me…“is a very important call.”

I yelp, shuddering against the desk when his palm slaps my ass hard.

“So unless you want me to fuck you in the ass right now, bent over my desk while I take care of business on the phone, I’d *leave*.”

I shake all over when his big hand slips between my legs and his palm cups my leaking, embarrassingly wet pussy.

“*Fly away while you can, little bird*.”

He lets go of me and steps back. I’m shaking, my thoughts scattering in a million directions and my eyes unable to focus as I stand up and pull my panties and yoga pants back into place.

Then I’m gone, bolting from the office as quickly as I can.

Back in my room, I listen to him barking into his phone for a while, yelling about something. Eventually, that fades.

I end up spending the rest of the day unpacking my boxes, hanging my clothes in the walk-in closet, and otherwise setting up my room as best as I can.

It’s quiet later—so quiet that I assume Bane has left again. I creep through the penthouse, nervously glancing into every room, my adrenaline still pulsing through my veins. But the house is empty. No Bane. No Alfred.

Just me.

I’m heading back to my room with a bag of pretzels snagged from the kitchen when I notice the door at the end of the hallway.

It’s open.

I don’t think it was open before. Actually, I don’t think I even *saw* this door before: I would have peeked inside looking for the monster of the house, whom I seem to both fear and gravitate to.

I chew on my lip, hesitating. Then I carefully approach the door.

It’s stairs, leading up into darkness. Common sense or at least basic survival instinct would tell me to *leave this alone*.

But then I prove just how fucking crazy I am and start to climb the staircase. When I open the door at the top, my breath catches.

I’m outside, on the roof of Bane’s penthouse. But even though I can see the glow and lights of the city all around me, there’s a heavy, dark structure covering the whole space, keeping it shadowed, dark, and gloomy.

I suddenly realize I’m a *huge*, gorgeous, Victorian-style greenhouse.

The glassed-in space is full of huge, leafy, potted trees and plants, giant statues of humans, monsters, and gargoyles, and rows of hedges in planter boxes.

I step out into the glass-in night air with a shiver, wondering if I should go get a sweatshirt. The door clicks shut behind me.

My heart jumps as I whirl and grab the doorknob.

Fuck.

Locked.

The air around me shifts. A black energy creeps over my skin, making the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I start to turn, shaking a little, looking for the source of my anxiety.

I don’t get the chance.

Because just then, a weight slams heavily into me. I scream, my heart leaping into my throat as I'm shoved against the door. My palms and cheeks press flat to the metal, and the familiar scent of leather and woodsmoke invades my senses.

Strong hands grab mine, keeping them pinned above my head as stubble and lips brush against my earlobe.

“You wanted to *play*, little bird?” Bane rasps into my ear. His huge, muscled body leans hard against me, pinning me to the door. His teeth nip at my ear, and I shiver as a needy ache slithers through my core.

“*Let's. Fucking. Play.”*

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18

DOVE

I THOUGHT I knew what adrenaline flooding my system felt like earlier, when he had me bent me over the desk.

When he spanked my ass, and growled into my ear, and promised he'd be fucking me when I least expected it.

When he warned me "*Fly away while you still can, little bird*."

I'm fully realizing now that I *should have fucking listened to him*.

Because suddenly, with Bane's full weight pinning me to the locked door and his words still humming in my ears, this all feels more *real*.

This isn't going to end in him fingering me to orgasm. Or even coming on my face, or in my mouth.

This time, he's not going to stop until he's tearing me apart.

I shiver as I feel his muscles coil and clench. A hard bulge pulses against my ass, and when the realization hits, dark, malevolent need coils through my center.

It's his cock—already hard, huge, waiting to pound into me.

My mind flickers back to the night in my carriage house, with Evie sleeping down on the couch.

When Bane woke me up straddling my chest, fisting his dick above my face.

No, not a dick. Not even a cock. The thing between this man's legs can only be described a fucking *monster*. He's huge; thick and long. I could barely get my mouth around him, let alone my hand.

Fear ripples through me.

There's no fucking *way* that thing is fitting inside me. Not without ripping me in two.

Bane's mouth dips to my ear, and I gasp sharply when I feel his teeth drag over the flesh.

"Now, where's that needy little fuck-toy who came barging into my office earlier, demanding that I fuck her?"

I bristle, even despite the pulsing intensity of the moment.

"I didn't—"

"Oh, but you *did*, little bird," he growls. His tongue licks at the lobe of my ear, and a dark, sultry ache twists through my center.

"So desperate. So *annoyed* that I hadn't fucked her yet."

He grinds his hips against me, and my breath catches when I feel his body and the sheer *mass* of his cock press against my ass.

"*N-no*…" I croak.

"*Yessss*, little bird," he murmurs into my ear, licking it again. "And you know what they say about curiosity and cats…"

He uses one hand to keep both of mine pinned above my head and wraps the fingers of the other around my waist. I jolt, my body tightening and clenching heatedly when Bane lets the full weight of his body sink completely against me, pressing me tighter to the locked door, as if he might just fuck me right here.

His mouth drags up and down the side of my neck, his hot breath and low growls sending me into a delirium, as if there's a wild beast or an actual monster from a horror movie snarling into my flesh, deciding which spot is the most tender to tear into first.

I whimper brokenly when his huge hand slides around my waist, drags across my belly, and then deftly pushes down over my sex, cupping it through my yoga pants and underwear.

“Well, curiosity is going to get *this* little pussy *fucked*.”

He tightens his grip on me through the fabric, and I whine a low, mortifyingly needy sound. Bane just growls a low, deep chuckle into my ear as he starts to rub my soaking cunt through my clothes.

“Here’s what’s going to happen,” he murmurs coldly into my ear. “You’re getting fucked tonight. Hard, without mercy, *multiple* times.”

My fingers curl against the metal of the door above my head as he slowly grinds his body against me. Anticipation shudders through me as I feel the enormous, hot bulge of his monster dick rubbing against my ass.

“I’m not going to stop when you say no. I’m going to ignore you when you say please. When you beg me to slow down, I’m going go even harder, and deeper, and faster.” I cry out when his teeth viciously bite the shell of my ear. “*I’m going to ruin you, little bird*,” he snarls, in a tone I haven’t heard from him before.

This is more than somno-play. More than filthy words growled in my ear and the rough way he fingered me to orgasm.

This is something darker, deeper, and much more real.

“*Pirouette*,” he murmurs darkly. “That’s the one thing you can say that will make me stop. But if it does…stop, that is…this whole thing with us is done.”

Wait. If I say the magic word, he stops this mad game, lets me go…and I can go home? And not marry him? Did I hear that right?

“You’re not imagining things, little bird,” he rasps, grinding his erection into my ass. “Say the safe word, and the game ends. And with it, our entire arrangement. The marriage, the contract…*all of it*.”

He stills, and so do I, my breath coming ragged and choppy.

I twist my head slightly to the side. “I…I don’t under—”

“But if it ends,” Bane continues, “it *all* ends.” His mouth hovers an inch from my ear. “And that includes discovering the truth about Lark.”

The world goes still. My throat tightens, and coldness slithers down my back.

“There’s more to her than you know,” he rumbles in a deep, sensually low voice. “Secrets you’ll never uncover.”

I swallow thickly, my breath skipping. “And…if…if I play this game…”

“Then maybe you’ll find out,” he muses. “Or… Maybe you won’t.”

I start to shake my head. “That’s not fai—”

“No one ever said life was fair,” he growls. “But I can make you one promise. If you end this game by saying that word, Lark’s secrets remain buried with her.”

There’s nothing threatening or malicious in his tone. It’s like he’s just stating facts: play, and not say the safe word, and let him fuck me, which I know is going to be…well, *intense* is an understatement. If I do all of that, I *might* learn something important about my friend.

Or I can walk away and never find out.

I shiver, breathing in the cold metal of the door. “How do I know—”

“That I actually have something to tell you about her that you don’t know?” I feel him shrug. “You don’t. But walk away, and you’ll always *wonder*, won't you?”

He lets go of my body, his hand sliding from between my legs and where they're pinning my arms above my head before stepping back.

Fuck. He’s right.

“*Fine*,” I choke, steeling myself as I place my palms against the wall. I close my eyes and arch my back a little. “Do it. Do your fucking worst.”

The silence hangs for three long seconds. Then, quietly, Bane starts to laugh.

“Oh no, little bird,” he murmurs with dark amusement. “That’s not how this game goes.”

His mouth returns to my ear.

“I told you: I don’t want to be *served* my meal of you.” His teeth nip at me, and I whimper pathetically. “I’m going to hunt you. Not chase. *Hunt*.”

My heart jolts violently in my chest.

Fucking *what*?

His large hands slide over my hips, twisting me to face the dark, glass-covered rooftop.

It was colder earlier, but it’s warmed now, turning the air hazy with misty fog.

“I’ll give you a sixty-second head start,” Bane murmurs behind me, his large hands still splayed over my hips. “You can run, you can hide. But this door stays locked…and there’s no other way down.”

His hands slide from my hips, leaving me shaking as my eyes struggle to pierce the gloomy maze of trees, gargoyles, and hedges.

“*Don’t forget your word*,” he rasps in a haunted, dark tone. “Sixty. Fifty-nine.”

I whirl. “Wait, we’re starting *now*?!”

“Fifty-eight. Fifty-seven.”

Holy fuck.

I don’t even think. I just turn and run into the garden, letting the dark mist swirl around me and leaving him counting by the door.

It’s a big roof, but not huge. I get to the far side in less than twenty seconds, and the width is even less than the length.

This won’t be about putting distance between us. It’ll be about *hiding*.

Moving quietly.

…Like the prey he wants me to be.

I shiver as I duck behind a row of low hedges and dart down the length of it. I almost scream as I round a corner and practically crash into the leering, snarling face of a carved gargoyle.

“Thirty!” I hear Bane bark out.

Fear and panic explode through me as I scurry behind a huge Japanese Maple and then slide behind another statue, this one of a huge stag with its front legs mounting a boulder.

“Ten.”

Doom thunders through me as cold, anxious dread pools in my stomach.

I lied to him before, when he asked me how many men I’d been with. I knew what he was insinuating based on my addiction.

It pissed me off, which is why I said dozens, just to stick it to him.

But it wasn’t dozens. It wasn’t a *single* dozen.

Or a half dozen.

Or three, or two.

I’ve slept with a grand total of *one* person: Scott, my high school boyfriend from seven years ago. And I don’t even remember any of it.

Since then, there haven’t been any other men.

I know that hyper-sexuality, promiscuity, and casual, even transactional sex go hand in hand with both the sort of nightmare I experienced and hardcore drug use.

But ironically, the trauma that pushed me into heroin addiction in the first place is the reason I could never bring myself to engage in that kind of behavior.

Being chained to a cot and listening to your best friend being raped and murdered in the room next door has a way of eradicating your sex drive.

So, yeah, there haven't been dozens.

I've slept with exactly one person, seven years ago in a previous lifetime, and I literally have no memory of it. For all intents and purposes, I'm sneaking around the misty dark of this rooftop, waiting for the villainous shadow hunting me to find me and fuck me, as a *virgin*.

And that maybe is what gives me the harshest reality check. Some part of me is clinging to this romantic notion of how your first time *should* be.

…And this sure as fuck isn't it.

Part of me screams that I can't lose my virginity like *this*, in a fucked-up game involving a man hunting me in the dark. Catching me. Pinning me down and tearing it from me.

But that's exactly what's about to happen.

"Zero."

The number thunders out like doom. But doom isn't supposed to make your insides liquefy. Doom shouldn't send heat flickering through your core, forcing your thighs to clench together and making your nipples tighten.

"Ready or not, *here I come*," he rasps from the misty darkness.

From everywhere and nowhere all at once.

For a second, I consider keeping right where I am, just curling into a ball and hiding in the shadows. But this is literally his home.

He knows this hunting ground inside and out. I'm the tourist here.

I hear the rustle of a large body brushing past tree branches from somewhere to the left. My pulse jackhammers, my skin tingling with a terrifyingly erotic rush as I scamper to the side and duck behind another looming statue. I glance back around the corner, peeking back toward the stag statue. A shadow ripples across it, and I suck in my breath, darting back.

"Mmmm, you're hiding so well," Bane growls through the dark mist. "But the thing is, I can *smell* your fear and anxiety." He chuckles darkly. "I can

also smell how fucking wet that greedy little cunt is. It’s giving you away, baby.”

I scurry down a path, then dart into the shadows of the low, overhanging branches of a tree.

“Your pulse is as loud as a drum. Every breath gives you away, baby girl.”

I shake as I huddle under the branches, hugging myself. He wasn’t fucking kidding when he said he'd hunt me like prey. That’s exactly how I feel right now: like a small forest animal being stalked by an apex predator.

A twig cracks nearby. It’s so quiet up here on the roof, under the glass, high above the noise of the city. Maybe he *can* hear my heartbeat. My breathing. My very thoughts.

I peer through the branches and spot the stag statue again. Wait. The statue was back the *other* way. And that’s not the way stag’s head was fac—

When the statue turns, its tall, lethal antlers clawing toward the sky, I almost scream in pure blind terror as its eyes flicker like obsidian, piercing the fog.

My heart lurches into my throat as I back away. The antlers advance, slowly, stalking me. I almost trip as I turn and dart down another pathway, my breath becoming ragged as a million synapses fire in my brain at once.

Suddenly, this is more than I was bargaining for.

Much more.

I whirl and start to bolt back to the door that leads downstairs. To normalcy.

To a life I understand, even if it hurts.

I know he said it was locked. But maybe I can bang on it and get Alfred’s attention. He can't know that his boss plays insanely fucked-up kink games on the roof at night dressed like a fucking *stag*.

Heavy footsteps follow me. I somehow stifle the urge to scream, but the ragged panting of my breaths is far too loud as I dart down a row of hedges,

stumble my way around a leering gargoyle, clawing my way through mist and branches, trying to get back to the door.

I almost make it.

I can *see* the fucking thing. Then a branch snaps behind me, jarring me and causing me to make the fatal mistake of starting to turn.

No.

I trip over my own feet, and I'm trying to course correct when a hand wraps like iron around my calf.

"*Gotcha*."

I scream blue murder as he twists my leg sharply, violently sending me to the ground. Stars explode through my vision, my breath slammed from my lungs. I kick against the ground, desperate to claw myself up.

Not happening.

A heavy weight slams into me, crushing me to the ground and forcing whatever air is left in my lungs out of them. A big hand wraps around my mouth, clamping it shut, choking back my cry.

My hair gets wrapped around a fist and yanked so hard that I swear he's trying to tear it from my scalp.. Pain and adrenaline explode through my system as he tugs my head back by the hank of hair. His teeth scrape across the tender skin of my neck, up my jugular until his hot breath is right in my ear.

"*Now you're fucking MINE, baby*."

He lets go of my mouth but keeps me pinned against the ground between the fistful of my hair and his body on mine. His weight lifts for a moment, but before I can hope for escape, his hand grabs the back of my yoga pants.

Oh fuck…

I groan, choking on another cry as Bane violently tears both my pants and my underwear down, shoving them to my knees. I kick and thrash; fear,

adrenaline, need and raw hunger swirling in me, igniting my blood more than any hit from a needle ever did.

Bane rips off my shoes and tosses them aside, yanking my pants off but leaving my torn panties caught around one ankle, like he doesn't give a shit so long as he can spread my legs.

…Which is exactly what he does next.

I moan, still fighting, but realizing how fucking futile it is. He pins my cheek to the ground, his hand twisting my hair tight as he shoves my legs apart and settles his weight on the backs of my thighs.

SMACK.

I scream when he slaps my ass, over and over, until I don't know where pain stops and pleasure begins.

He shoves my shirt up my back, then grunts in frustration before he lets go of my hair and uses both hands to literally rip the shirt in two. He lets the pieces drop to each side, still covering my lower arms. My bra is next, my body jerking as he rips the back clasp open.

The lace of my bra and the tatters of my shirt get shoved up my body, freeing my breasts, and I whine when my sensitive nipples drag across the rough ground. His palm crashes against my ass again as his other hand shoves under me to maul one of my tits, viciously torturing a nipple with his thumb and forefinger.

"You look so fucking perfect like this, little bird," he growls, his voice a whole new level of dark, rasping like a monster. "Like you were made to take my cock in all your slutty holes on the ground like this, like my good little cum-whore."

Jesus Christ.

It's so fucked up. So raw, so violent, so demented.

…And it's pushing *every fucking button I have*.

The jangle of his belt buckle rips me back to reality. My eyes go wide, my breath choking against the dirty ground. I think again of the fucking size of

him, and my insides rebel.

“*No!*” I scream, trying to shove him off as fear grips me. “Wait! You're too big!”

Bane chuckles darkly behind me, his only response to slap my raw, red ass again. He roughly shoves my legs wider, his knees on either side of my hips as I feel him brace himself over me with a hand.

“*Please*!” I choke. “*Please, stop—*”

“You know how to make it stop, baby,” he purrs. I cry out, whimpering as he roughly cups my throbbing pussy, his finger easily sinking into me as I blubber and moan into the ground. “But the thing is,” he snarls, “*I don’t think this pussy WANTS me to stop*.”

He strokes up and down my slit, making my hips roll on their own accord.

Then his hand slips away, and his hips push lower, and I feel the *huge*, swollen head of his cock at my opening.

Holy fucking Christ.

He’s going to tear me in two. He’s going to literally kill me with his dick.

“*Bane*!”

“Just say the fucking word, baby,” he rasps into my ear, smearing the head of his dick up and down my pussy lips.

I whimper, flailing my hands in a futile attempt to claw at him or shove him away. But all that happens is my wrists are grabbed and my hands slammed to the ground above my head.

His cock pushes against my hole, and my body tenses.

Fucking hell, he’s not even using a condom.

“*Please, no…*” I choke into the ground. “*It’s too big!*”

Bane ignores me. I know why.

I haven’t said the word.

I’ve thought it over in my head and tasted it on my tongue. But even now, with pure blind terror blurring the lines between fear and excitement, pain and pleasure, I still can’t bring myself to say it out loud.

And even when I try to tell myself it’s all for Lark—to learn the secret he’s dangling over my head—I know that’s bullshit.

I’m not doing this out of some twisted sense of loyalty to her memory.

I’m not saying *pirouette* because *I fucking want this*.

Deep down, I’m a twisted, subby, deviant little cum slut.

And he’s about to prove it.

“*There’s* a good girl,” Bane rasps into my ear as the swollen head of his dick slips between my slick pussy lips and lodges there. I gasp when his teeth rake up my neck before biting down.

“*Scream for me, baby*.”

He rams in with one brutal stroke, and he damn well gets his wish.

I fucking *yell* as his monster dick tears into me, stretching me past anything I could have ever imagined as he fills me to the limit.

It fucking *hurts*. but Bane just groans, grinding his fat cock deep inside me before he rolls his hips back, pulling back out. He thrusts into me again, forcing the air from my lungs, making me let out a choked, guttural *uuungh*. My eyes roll back as he slides out and then roughly fucks into my poor pussy again.

Except slowly, the pain is starting to fade. He rolls his hips again, sliding out and then viciously fucking back into me. The sloppy wet sounds of my pussy clinging to his swollen dick fill my ears as Bane starts to ram me harder, faster, his groin crashing into my tenderized ass as he starts to well and truly *fuck me*.

And that twisted, snarling, ragged and rough thing inside of me *roars*.

I scream in pleasure, my eyes squeezed shut as the sheer monstrous size of him pummels my pussy into fucking submission. My legs are shaking, his

every thrust driving the air from my lungs with those grunted *uuungh uuungh uuungh* sounds. My arms strain against the hand wrapped tight around my wrists as he ruts into me like a wild animal.

"*Mmm, baby,*" he snarls. "Your sweet, messy cunt is taking my cock like such a good little whore. Such a *greedy* cum hole for me to fill. *Fuuuuck*!" he roars, groaning loudly as he rams into me. "This pretty pussy is strangling the fuck out of my dick, baby. I'm going to break it, little bird. I'm going to *break* this fucking pussy so it never works for anyone else but *me*."

He drives in over and over, stroking against that spot inside that makes me liquefy. The place that makes my legs shake and quiver uncontrollably, my pulse jackhammer, and my whole world dim until all I know is the deliciously brutal sensation of his huge cock fucking into me and completely owning me.

I scream into the ground as I come so hard that tears bead in the corners of my eyes. My belly clenches, my walls clamping down around his huge dick as I spasm, my body arching from the ground. A spray of wet liquid coats my thighs and the ground beneath me, and I'm dimly aware of being *amazed* at myself.

I've never done that before. But then, I've never once, even in my wildest fantasies, been *fucked* like this.

I come again, squirting on his cock and my thighs a second time before Bane finally slows his thrusts. I cry out, sobbing in pleasure on the ground as he slaps my ass once, twice, three times.

I shiver when he slides his massive size out of me, literally leaving me feeling empty and stretched open as he rolls me over like a limp ragdoll.

…and my heart lurches into my throat.

Holy FUCK.

I almost scream. Because when he rolls me onto my bruised and battered back, I'm staring up into the face of a nightmare creature.

A monster with Bane's torso—sculpted from marble, covered in tattoos and scars, with muscles *everywhere*. With huge arms, broad, sculpted shoulders, a wall of chest, and grooved abs and hip muscles that dive down to where his *fucking huge dick* juts thick, swollen, and still hard as rock, glistening with my cum.

But the head turns him monstrous. Because I'm not looking into Bane's face. I'm looking up at a blank, black mask, featureless except for shadowed eyeholes…

…and huge, towering horns, like those of a stag, jutting up and clawing at the night sky.

I pale when he moves over me and roughly pushes my legs apart. I chew on my lip, just *staring* at this fearsome vision as he fists his big dick and eases the swollen head against my battered pussy. He grabs one of my legs and wraps it around his hips. Then he reaches for the other one, and I weakly lift it into his grip, whimpering as my legs wrap tight around his hard body.

He looms over me, the mask barely a foot from my face and the antlers twisting into the sky above. He braces one veined hand flat on the ground next to me. The other wraps around my throat, sending a bolt of dark need snaking through my core.

My hands fall against him, fingertips dragging over a burn scar across his tattooed chest. His grip tightens around my neck, making my eyes squeeze shut as his cock pushes into me.

"*Eyes on me, baby,*" he rasps. "Eyes on me while I tear this greedy cunt in half."

This time, I'm not only ready for the brutality. I'm craving it. Needing it.

As much as I want to call *him* the monster—for trapping me, for binding me with a fucking contract, for giving me a goddamn safe word and chasing me like an animal before straight up *breaking* my pussy with his gigantic cock, and for wearing a fucking antler mask while he's doing it—that's not quite fair.

Maybe he *is* a monster. But he's not the only one.

If he’s broken and monstrous, then *so am I*.

I cry out, my hips lifting off the ground as Bane shoves his fat cock into my body. He starts to fuck me hard, pounding me into the dirty ground beneath me, my ass and back scraping against it as I wrap my arms and legs around him and surrender to the madness.

Again, and again he rams into me, churning my insides, twisting that needy ache inside me until I can’t stand it any longer. Then, without warning, he rips the mask off, letting it fall to the ground, his wild, obsidian eyes stabbing into me.

“*Eyes on me, little bird*,” he rasps as his hand wraps tight around my throat and as his monster cocks buries itself in me to the hilt. As whatever grip on reality that I have left shatters into a million pieces and I explode for him all over again.

“*Eyes always on me*.”

His mouth crushes to mine. And just as my orgasm starts to detonate inside of me, I feel his teeth pierce my lip. Copper floods my mouth, and suddenly, everything twists and writhes and *shatters.*

Every nerve, atom, and pleasure point in my body ignites in white fire as he roars into my mouth, and his hard, violent body coils and clenches against me.

His cock throbs and pulses, and I moan into his lips as I feel the hot ropes of his cum spilling into me, over and over and *over* as I come for him again.

Something feels different when he finally stops. Not just the raw, numb ache between my legs. Not the scrapes and bruises on my ass and back, or the taste of copper as a drop of blood trickles down my cheek from the corner of my mouth.

I just opened Pandora’s box. I just stepped through the fucking looking glass into Alice’s world.

And there’s no coming back.

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19

DOVE

Dear Boo,

I’m a horrible person. Call me a bitch and a cunt. Not all the time, of course. But sometimes, I REALLY am.

I'm not saying that to gain sympathy, or paint myself as the victim. TRUST me, I’m not the victim here.

He is.

So is she.

I did it again. And I hate myself for it. Bane and I were supposed to meet after school in the student parking lot next to the field house. But instead, I waited by the locker room entrance for the football team to come out after practice. Scott always gets this kind of part-creep, part-hungry look on his face when he sees me. I know it’s because I look like the bad girl version of Dove that would fuck him with the lights on, or actually swallow.

I didn’t outright flirt with him. That’s not why I do this. I just smiled and acted dumb and talked to him about football (barf). Then I asked him to walk me to the parking lot, and he did, probably because he thought he might get lucky.

Eww. Gross. Never. But that's not why I do this. I'm not ACTUALLY trying to steal Scott from Dove. Just... She acts like such an uptight asshole sometimes. Like she's so much better. So part of me doing this was a fuck-you to her. Like, maybe her knuckle-dragging boyfriend might think of me next time he's fucking her from behind.

It's so petty. God, I hate this.

But also it was to fuck with Bane. And that's the part I don't understand. He's never done anything. He's always literally PERFECT. Not "perfect" as in clingy and annoying. Just actually, for real perfect. Too perfect. Maybe that's why I fuck with him like this.

I had Scott walk me to the edge of the parking lot, and then I was suddenly like "oh hey there's my boyfriend" which probably deflated his boner. But then I gave him a big hug.

I knew Bane saw it happen. And I knew when I walked up to him that he was pissed, because he asked me wtf it was about. I said I was just being friendly and to stop being so possessive. He didn't push it, and that just pissed me off even MORE. Like maybe I wanted him to blow up. To show me that he's not perfect…because I sure as fuck am not.

Boo, what the fuck is wrong with me? I mean seriously. I don't know why the fuck I do this.

I hate myself so much right now.

* * *

IT'S NOT the first entry like that I've read in the last few days. I've gone back to the beginning of Lark's diary to read it chronologically, and there's a *lot* of them.

The first time I read about her doing something awful behind my back, or Bane's, I felt sick. Like someone was pulling a really shitty prank on me.

The girl I knew, who was my best friend in the world, had problems and issues. But they were *nothing* like what she's written about here and there in the diary.

But the more I read, the more I realize that I didn't know the girl I called my best friend nearly as well as I thought I did. There was real darkness in her. And pain, and self-doubt, and confusion. I vaguely remember through the haze of memory loss that I was always so envious of her and Bane because they always seemed so goddamn perfect for each other. And the fact that I *truly* can't remember a single thing about dating Scott probably says it all.

But now here I am, with Bane.

Engaged to him.

Living with him.

Fucking him.

It's happened four more times in the last week since the night on the roof. That next day—*fuck*. I was sore in the way water is wet and the sun is hot.

It felt like my pussy had gone ten rounds with Mike Tyson in his prime. I spent Sunday morning curled in a ball in my bed. Then I found a bag of lavender Epsom salts sitting outside my door and spent the second half of the day in the tub, soaking my wrecked body.

Still…

So fucking worth it, even though I could barely get through rehearsal on Monday because my pussy was still screaming at me for fucking a horse all Saturday night.

Or a stag, I guess.

And worth it even if every time I think of her, or even glance at her diary, I feel like an utter piece of shit.

Maybe the entries about Lark being a psycho manipulative cunt behind Bane's back—and mine—are a blessing in disguise. Maybe they'll inject

just enough bitterness into my memory of her that I can stomach sleeping with Bane.

Because I have, four more times since that night. And even though every time it happens I sit in my room later, biting back tears of shame and self-loathing as I read her words from seven years ago…

I keep doing it.

Like I've said before: you're always an addict. You just strive to be one that doesn't use.

My problem is, I've found a new addiction.

And he lives down the hall.

I exhale, closing Lark's diary and wincing as I hobble to the bathroom. I wasn't with Bane tonight. He's been gone since this morning, presumably for some work thing. But last night…*Jesus*.

Last night he fucked me on an open ledge—the literal ledge—of his glassed-in roof, with my head hanging over the side and gravity wrapping its long fingers around my heart. He fucked me like an animal, both of us slapping and clawing at each other until we were both bloodied beyond measure.

This…can't be healthy.

But then addictions rarely are.

In the bathroom, I open the medicine cabinet and take my nightly buffet of lithium, risperidone, Zoloft, Lexapro and buspirone and then chase it all down with a lorazepam plus a melatonin for dessert, hold the whipped cream.

I drop my eyes to the lineup of pill bottles on the counter.

Little plastic soldiers to remind me exactly how fucked in the head I am.

…As if my nighttime activities of the last week or so aren't proof enough.

I frown, remembering as I stare at the bottles that Dad texted me recently, reminding me to make time next week to meet with Dr. Caruso. He didn't

say why, but it’s been about six months since my last appointment regarding my psych meds, so it’s probably time for a dosage review.

Gotta keep the crazy in check, right?

I limp back to bed and gingerly slide under the covers before I turn off the light. Even with the lorazepam and melatonin slowly entering my bloodstream, sleep doesn’t come.

This…can’t be healthy.

But then addictions rarely are.

I stare at the ceiling, thinking about, well…

Bane.

I’ve been doing that a lot recently. Like, *a lot*.

It started as cautious wariness. A week ago, the thoughts turned vicious and wild and all-consuming, which is why I call him my new drug—a toxic high that I simply can’t get enough of.

But in the last few days…I don’t know.

It’s started to run even deeper. And that scares me more than any nighttime chase, or freakishly giant cock, or psycho stag mask.

A lot of it is that being near him has always made me think of Lark, for obvious reasons. And since I’ve started sleeping with him, that’s only gotten more intense. But it’s not *only* a guilty feeling, like I’m a piece of shit for stealing him or whatever. The more time I spend with him, the more I find myself thinking about that chapter of my life, trying to piece together the missing bits of my past.

It’s not like Bane has a magic dick that fixes the holes in my memory. But you know how the scent of a certain candle will make you immediately think of a specific Christmas spent at a cousin’s house? Or how the taste of a candy brings you back to an exact day on the playground in the second grade? Yeah.

Bane ignites a little spark of memory inside me. Not enough to rediscover things I've forgotten, but enough that it brings me back to that time.

And I like that, a lot.

Maybe more than I should.

I think I'm starting to like *him* more than I should.

Even if he still unnerves me at times, and looks at me now and then like he's so fucking mad at me for taking Lark away from him.

I've been tempted to show him the diary, especially the parts about her being a psycho manipulative asshole behind his back, like that might lessen the anger he feels toward me for getting her killed.

But I'd never do that. Even if I *wasn't* on a hundred different psych drugs.

That's just not me.

Then again, *he's* just not me, either.

So… Who even knows what I'm capable of.

* * *

"HERE IS FINE, THANKS."

The guy driving me back from rehearsal in the black Escalade frowns, glancing at me in the rearview mirror.

Ivan? I think that's his name.

"Miss Marchetti," he growls in his heavy Russian accent. "We are not yet at Mr. Antonov's building—"

"I know," I smile. "I just…" I exhale. "I could use some air, you know?"

"I will roll down windows."

I laugh. "No, Ivan, I… Can I get out here and walk?"

He frowns again. “Sorry, Miss. Mr. Antonov's orders.”

I pout. “*Please*, Ivan? I swear I won’t tell. We’re only two blocks from the building.” I roll my eyes, gesturing through the windshield. “Also, it’s the Upper West Side. What could possibly happen?”

I can see the gears turning in his head.

“You know that girl you saw me talking to after rehearsal the other day?”

He blushes.

He knows who I mean. Elodie is in New York from Paris guesting with the Zakharova for the season. She mostly keeps to herself, but we chat now and then.

I’ve caught Ivan staring at her like a lovestruck puppy about dozen times.

“Her name is Elodie,” I say in a sing-song voice. “She’s French.” I grin at him. “*And* single…”

Ivan swallows, his eyes darting to mine in the rearview mirror.

“Let me out here, I won’t breathe *a word*, and I’ll ask her if I can give you her number. Deal?”

His mouth twists. Then he grins.

“*Da*, deal.”

He pulls up to the curb and unlocks the door.

“You're the best, Ivan. Okay if I leave my dance bag in the car?”

“Of course, Miss.”

I pat him on the shoulder. “You’re awesome.”

I watch the Escalade pull away, wincing a little bit. I totally just bullshitted that. Elodie keeps to herself, but I’m pretty sure it’s because she’s chatting with her *boyfriend* back in Paris.

There’s zero percent chance she'll want me to give her number to Ivan.

I’m an asshole.

I could stay on this street and be at Bane’s place in two minutes. But it’s busy, and noisy, and I really do need to clear my head.

I head down a side street to the next block over, a little removed from the flow of traffic. It’s quieter here, and there’s a back door to Bane’s building on this street, so it'll work.

I find myself wondering if he’ll be home when I get there. Not because I’m hoping to play one of our games—okay, I’m not *opposed* to the idea…

It’s more that… I don’t know…

My face heats.

Because you just want him to be there.

I’ve realized in the last week that I don’t mind living with him.

I like it. A lot.

It’s not like we have tons of long, philosophical discussions about the universe. But it’s nice to have someone there when you get home who asks how dance was today. Who grins and inquires if you’re still sore after the brutal fucking-to-within-an-inch-of-your-life they gave you barely twenty-four hours previously. Who asks if you’re hungry, because they’re about to cook or order delivery.

It’s just…*nice.*

I grin, my steps quickening. Suddenly, I sense someone behind me.

Eyes watching me.

I whip my head around, glancing into the darkness behind me. There’s nothing there, but I still put my hand into the pocket of my jacket and lace my fingers through the keys to the carriage house that I still carry around.

I start walking a little faster.

The footsteps behind me do the same.

I whirl fully, brandishing the keys in my fingers, my face stony.

“Hey!” I bark, the hair on the back of my neck bristling.

No reply. No sound. No movement.

I swallow nervously. “Bane?” I murmur. “I… This isn’t fun, if that’s you.”

The seconds tick by. Another shiver ripples up my spine.

I turn back and start to power walk toward the back door to Bane’s building. It’s only a block away. And this *is* the Upper West Side. What could possibly—

The footsteps get louder, closer behind me. This time, I don’t turn around.

…I just fucking *run*.

I pelt down the block, my legs pumping, my breath ragged and my nerves jangling. The rough thud of heavy boots on the pavement grows louder and closer. I swear I can hear the grunting, snarled rasp of a man’s heavy breathing.

I choke out a cry, hurling myself the last hundred feet down the block, sure that any second someone is going to grab my hair or tackle me to the ground.

I hit the glass back door to the building with a thud, pounding on it and screaming until two Antonov guards inside rush to it and shove it open.

“Right behind me!!” I scream as I tumble into the lobby and dart behind them.

The men pull out their sidearms and duck out, looking up and down the street. They glance at each other, then at me through the glass, still panting, my hair wild.

“Ms. Marchetti?” one of them says gently as they step back inside and holster their guns. “Did you actually see someone behind you?”

“N-no,” I mumble. “But he was right there. I could hear him chasing me.”

The man nods. “Okay, I believe you.”

He *doesn't* believe me. It's written all over his face, especially when he steps closer and discreetly sniffs, trying to smell the alcohol on me.

"I don't drink," I say tightly through clenched teeth.

He winces. "I—of course not, Ms. Marchetti." He smiles. "I'll escort you upstairs personally, and we'll have five men search the surrounding blocks right now."

I nod, exhaling as I chew on my lip. "Yeah… Please do. He was *there*."

I know he was.

I felt it.

…I'm *not* crazy.

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BANE

“NOTHING?” I growl, storming through the lobby of my building.

“*Nyet*, Boss,” Sergey says quietly as he falls into step next to me before we come to a stop waiting for the elevator. “I had ten men tear the neighborhood apart, six blocks in every direction. Not a goddamn thing.“ He sighs. “Look, I’m not saying she didn’t hear something. But…” He lifts a shoulder.

“*Keep looking*.”

My hands were clenched to fists for the last half hour as I cut through midtown traffic like a maniac.

It's not like me.

At all.

I was never like this with Lark back in high school. I could be possessive, yes. But the level of sheer…I don’t even know what this is…

Possessiveness, definitely. But also something more feral than that. It makes me want to go outside, dig a goddamn moat around this building, and burn the rest of the fucking city to the ground.

I don’t care if there *wasn’t* anyone out there chasing her.

There could be, at some point.

The elevator arrives. “Keep looking, Sergey,” I growl more quietly as I step inside. “Please.”

“Of course.”

The doors close and the elevator ascends quickly to the top of the building. When the doors open I storm into the penthouse, throwing my coat over the back of a chair as I head for the stairs to the second floor.

I don’t know what I was expecting when this all started. Closure of some kind, maybe. Revisiting the past somehow.

I, more than most people, know that the past stays where it is, and you can’t really go back there. And yet, here we are.

Here *she* is.

And it’s become…more.

More than I ever imagined. More than I was looking for. Sometimes even more than I know how to process, when she’s in my thoughts every waking minute of the day, and creeping through every sleeping one, too.

All I know right now is this intense, near-psychotic need to protect her. To shield her from the evils of the world.

She’s already seen enough of them.

She’s not in her room when I open the door. I’m about to go check *mine* when I hear the sound of running water. My eyes drift to the ajar bathroom door and the steam rolling thickly out.

She’s standing motionless under the shower spray—naked, hugging herself, eyes staring vacantly at nothing, even when I walk into the bathroom and stop right in front of her on the other side of the glass wall. Even when I tap on it.

Nothing.

Fuck. She’s in shock.

I strip off my clothes and step into the shower with her. It’s only when I wrap my arms around her and pull her tight against my body that she jolts.

She gasps sharply, a scream lodging in her throat as she goes to hit me with a closed fist.

"*Easy*," I growl, catching her wrists tight and letting my eyes catch hers. "It's me," I murmur. "It's just me."

She blinks rapidly, her chest heaving, her nipples dragging against my skin.

"Tell me what happened."

She shakes her head, still half dazed as her eyes dart all over the place, unsure of where to look.

"*Tell me what happened*, little bird," I growl.

She's still fidgety, her gaze flitting everywhere and nowhere, like she's treading water in her mind.

So I do the first thing I can think of to snap her out of it.

My hand reaches down to cup her pussy. I stroke a thick finger up her lips, dragging it over the little nub of her clit. She spasms, jolting a little, and a bit of color seeps into her cheeks. I do it again, watching the shell of confusion and fear around her slowly begin to crack.

I roll my finger over her clit again and then sink my entire finger into her hole.

That does it.

She gasps like she's just come up for air. She chokes and sputters under the shower spray, and goes to hit me again.

Then she realizes who I am.

"*Bane*…" she murmurs, sinking into me.

I slowly slide my finger out of her pussy and wrap my arms around her.

It's not like I *don't* want the heat between her legs, but right now I only did that to drag her out of her stupor. Now that it's worked, pushing it further might shake her even more.

There’ll be time enough for that later. Hunting her. Fucking her in that savage way she brings out in me.

But for now, she needs safety.

I don’t think she’s had enough of that in her life.

I turn off the water, wrap her in my arms, and lift her up against my chest. She smiles weakly as I carry her out of the bathroom and to her bed. I slide our wet, naked bodies under the sheets, and I keep her close to me as she sinks against my body, resting her cheek on my chest.

We lie like that for God knows how long, her face against my skin, my hand stroking her wet hair.

“I—I’m *not* crazy,” she finally whispers into my chest.

“I know,” I say quietly.

“I… Someone *was* chasing me.” She lifts her head, her eyes pleading as they find mine. “They *were*.”

“I believe you, little bird,” I murmur, still stroking her hair.

She nods, then lowers her cheek to my chest again, her arms circling me.

We’ve haven’t done this. I mean, I’ve fucked her like a maniac five nights this week, but we’ve never shared a bed.

She sleeps here. I sleep in my own room.

I feel that’s the way it needs to be, and I don’t get the sense that she wants it to change, either.

But right now, I stay right where I am, holding her, feeling her breath across my chest as she slowly fades to sleep.

I didn’t expect this. I thought I knew what I was doing with her.

I had a plan.

And now she’s gone and smashed that all to pieces.

Damn her.

Damn the past.

Just… Damn it all.

I stay in her bed, holding her, relishing the feel of her sleeping body against mine and her breath brushing over my skin. I stay until her hair dries.

Then I very reluctantly slip out and head back to my room.

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BANE

SHE WAS the last of his thirteen victims.

Thirteen girls that motherfucker stalked, kidnapped, raped, tortured, and killed. Almost all not yet twenty years old, with their whole lives ahead of them.

Lives he snuffed out, leaving gaping craters in the lives of those they left behind.

His name was Lorenzo Cielo. The media called him “The Barber” because of his fondness for shaving his victims’ heads once he had them in his clutches.

Dove and Lark were the last two girls he scooped off the street and brought to his house of horrors out on Staten Island. The authorities later found twelve other bodies buried under the basement, after the fire that razed the hellhole to the ground during the attempted rescue.

What was never revealed in the ensuing media storm was that Lorenzo had once worked for Cesare Marchetti as his driver. He’d gone by Lorenzo *Caputo* back then: after what happened to Dove and Lark, Cesare spent *a lot* of money to make sure that little tidbit was buried.

I looked into it later: it wasn’t anything sinister on Cesare’s part, prick though he is. He buried Lorenzo’s connection to the Marchetti family because a criminal organization doesn’t exactly want media or law enforcement scrutiny.

It could have been sheer coincidence their paths crossed. Lorenzo might have recognized the two of them at the club the night Dove cajoled Lark into going out with fake IDs.

But we'll never know, because that motherfucker died the same night she did, in a hail of bullets when Cesare's men kicked down the door of his hideout.

The night one life was snuffed out and another was stripped down to the bones.

Lark didn't want to go out that night. I know that because she texted me about Dove twisting her arm and being relentless about it.

The woman I loved could have been spared what happened to her that night, except the person she considered her best friend pressured and pushed her.

I'm under no illusions that Lark was perfect.

Far from it.

She had her demons. She had a darkness inside her that she was constantly battling, trying to make peace with. I think it's something I recognized in her because I fight the same battle myself.

Maybe that's why when we met that first day we truly *saw* each other, in ways no one else ever had.

She was a broken, flawed, beautiful disaster. But she was *my* disaster. Mine.

I slowly twist the glass of vodka on the dark wood of my desk. Here I am again, facing something so similar that I don't know how to begin to process it.

A different sent of dark eyes that look right into me, seeing so much more of me than anyone else ever has. Seeing what I hide from everyone, and try to hide from her.

I know what I'm doing is wrong. I know I've drawn her into this entire thing under false pretenses, because of my need to trap her, and keep her, and force her to look at the ugly past.

But it’s quickly turning into something I didn’t bargain for. The warm embrace of a chaos I never thought I’d feel again. The thorny allure of a beauty that can cut and maim.

A knock on the door pulls me from my thoughts.

“Yes.”

Sergey enters with a curt nod.

“Well?”

He shakes his head. “Nothing. I’ve personally gone through every frame of CCTV footage from any building within a four-block radius, including this one.” He slowly shakes his head again. “I…” he frowns and looks down uncomfortably.

I know what he’s afraid to say.

“Speak,” I growl quietly.

He slowly drags his gaze back to mine. “Either this guy is a fucking ninja who knows the exact blind spot of every security camera in the Upper West Side, or…” He subtly shakes his head.

And there it is: the thing that’s been slowly burrowing into my mind until it's stuck there, like a thorn I’m trying to ignore.

I’ve seen her records from the rehab facility in Italy. I know all the meds she’s on. Lithium. Risperidone. Zoloft. Lexapro. Buspirone. Fucking *lorazepam*…

That’s…*a lot*. And I say that as someone who’s been on antipsychotics and antidepressants most of my life.

I’ve been trying not to see it. But I can't pretend it isn’t there anymore.

“Or else…what,” I murmur quietly.

Sergey looks right at me. “Or else there *was* no-one chasing her.”

I nod silently as I glance down again at the crystal tumbler in my fingers.

“Do you have the witness interviews from the bus incident?”

“Yeah.” He pulls a folder from the collection under his arm and drops it onto the desk in front of me. I open it and page to the report from the bus driver who braked *just* in time to avoid flattening her. I’ve seen it before, but it’s still jarring to read, after hearing her detailed, vivid account of someone physically grabbing her and shoving her into traffic.

His exact words are that he “didn’t see who pushed her”.

I slide my eyes down the page to where the driver’s contact information is listed: D’Angelo Harris, who lives in Bushwick with his wife and three kids.

I stand abruptly. “I’ll be back, Sergey.”

He frowns. “Where’re you going?”

“Brooklyn.”

* * *

“I ALREADY TOLD the police everything I saw.”

D’Angelo’s large frame fills the doorway of his duplex as he eyes me warily. Behind him, I can smell dinner cooking and hear teenagers laughing and yelling over the sound of the Jets game.

“I know you did,” I say calmly. “I’m just looking for any details you may have forgotten at the time due to the shock, but have maybe since remembered.”

He looks me up and down, then folds his muscled arms over his chest. “Do I need my union rep or my lawyer present for this?” he growls.

I shrug, reaching into my pocket and pulling out my wallet. I thumb out three hundreds and lift them between two fingers. “I don’t know…*do* you?”

D’Angelo’s gaze drops very deliberately to the bratva tattoos on the back of my hand, and the others on my neck, visible above my collar. Then our eyes

lock.

“I'm not interested in your money,” he growls.

“And I’m not interested in *you*, if that’s what you’re worried about,” I mutter back. “You did nothing wrong. In fact, I think you probably saved her life.”

His brow pinches. “So… This is about the girl?”

I nod.

“She yours?”

“She is,” I growl.

D’Angelo takes a deep breath. He glances behind him, then turns back to me, stepping out onto the small porch and half-shutting the door behind him. “Like I said, I already told the police what I saw…”

“I know,” I say, pulling the report out of my jacket, my eyes dropping to it. “It says here that you didn’t see who pushed her, and I wanted to—”

“That’s not what I said.”

I raise my eyes to his. “Excuse me?”

D’Angelo shakes his head. “I didn’t say I didn’t see *who* pushed her.” He looks at me with a mix of sadness and maybe pity. “I said I didn’t see *anyone* push her.”

My jaw tightens. “As in, you couldn’t see—”

“As in *no one pushed her*,” he murmurs. “I saw the whole thing plain as day. Your girl threw herself in front of my bus.”

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DOVE

A SHADOW FALLS OVER ME, jerking my attention from the diary and cup of tea I've been sitting with at the kitchen counter. Heat suffuses my face, and I quickly close the book when I see Bane standing at the other side of the island.

“Hi,” I blurt, still blushing.

I'm not blushing because he’s just walked in on me reading Lark’s diary. I don't feel like I “almost got caught”. A few days ago, I decided on the off-chance that Bane *knew* Lark’s diary and would recognize it, I disguised it. The bright blue is now covered in the dust jacket from a *super* boring book I happen to own on the Vaganova Method called The Fundamentals of Classical Dance.

So, no. My face isn’t reddening because of what I’m doing.

It’s because of *him*.

The feelings that have been slowly creeping like tendrils through my insides have put down roots and started to grow, no matter how much I try and fight it.

It began to get worse the other day, after I ran from what I’m pretty sure now was nobody.

Nobody chasing me. Nobody trying to hurt me.

That’s another whole worry, though luckily, I’m seeing Dr. Caruso tomorrow to reevaluate my dosages.

It’s almost comforting in a weird way to know that I’m not “going” crazy.

I'm already *there*.

Being crazy, I suppose, is sort of like being an addict. You’ll always be one, and there’s nothing that’ll change it. But sobriety is about being an addict who doesn't use. And being on psych meds is about keeping the crazy in check. Imaginary villains chasing me through the night? Yeah, that's not in check.

But that's not what I’m talking about with “things getting worse” after that night.

I’m talking about *Bane*.

He held me that night. He didn’t chase me, or roughly throw me to the ground and fuck me to within an inch of my life. He didn’t wring the orgasms from me until I was shuddering and blubbering and dripping all over the place.

He just held me. He pulled me out of the dark hole my head had fallen into, held me in his arms, and brought me to bed.

I truly don’t think I’ve ever fallen asleep so peacefully or felt as safe as I did the night I crashed out with my breath against his skin.

But later that same night, I woke to emptiness.

No warm chest beneath my cheek. Just cool sheets.

We sleep together all the time. By which I mean, we *fuck*. A lot. But there’s no actual sleeping together.

We haven’t actually ever fucked in a bed. It’s always against a wall, on the floor, bent over his desk, on a couch, one knee up on the bathroom vanity and my breath and makeup fogging and smudging the mirror… You get the idea.

I’m not getting all emo about it and *pining* for him to take me to literal bed.

He’s not that kind of guy. And I don’t think I’m that kind of girl.

But the memory of how I felt falling asleep in his arms has me in its grip. And no matter how hard I try, I can’t shake it away.

Bane nods at the book closed in front of me. “A little light reading?”

I glance down at the dust jacket masking Lark’s diary and then back up at him, grinning. “Totally. Casual, fun stuff, you know?”

His mouth twists in what I’ve come to realize is Bane’s version of a smirk.

“What’s up?” I ask.

His dark eyes lift to mine. “Come with me.”

He’s already walking away out of the kitchen. I slip the diary into my bag slung over the back of the kitchen stool before I quickly follow. He leads us up to the second floor, into one of the guest rooms that I've never had need to enter.

I’m confused when Bane opens another door, one that you'd think led to a closet. I follow him into the darkness, then he flips on a light switch.

Whoa.

It’s not a closet. It's an art studio, complete with easels, shelves of supplies, and a stack of blank, stretched canvases, including some extra-huge ones. I’ve never had a chance to paint on those, but have always wanted to try.

Slowly, I drag my eyes back to the easel in front of me.

My easel from home, with my name painted in dark pink on one of the legs.

“Your stepmother is…” Bane’s brow furrows deeply.

“A cunt? Yeah, I know,” I mutter.

A wry smile twists his lips. “She really is. I’ve been trying to coordinate with her to get this stuff for a few weeks. She didn’t make it easy.”

My eyes shine as I survey it all again. Then I blink and turn back to him. “You went and got all of this for me?”

He nods. “I’m not using this room for anything. So…” He lifts a shoulder. “It’s yours. For—”

I don’t know what prompts me to do it. Gratitude, I guess. But it’s not just a trade for the favor he’s done for me. It’s not payment.

It’s just something I want to do.

So I do it. I turn, grab the front of his shirt, and lean up on my toes to kiss him.

Bane freezes, coldness radiating off him. I let the kiss linger another few seconds before I pull away, my face red. I turn away from him, coughing nervously as I quickly walk back to the table full of paints and art supplies.

“Sorry,” I mumble. “I know that’s probably not part of our arrange—”

Strong hands grab me from behind, lifting me off the floor and twisting me around. I whimper as Bane's mouth sears to mine, his kiss fierce and wild and unhinged as my arms and legs wrap around his hard, muscled body.

We go crashing backward, and I’m barely aware of the easel falling over. It takes the stack of oversized canvases with it, and I shriek into his mouth as we go toppling over into a riot of oil paints splattering across one of the giant canvases on the floor.

His mouth is hungry and warm, and his tongue tastes minty and sweet as it darts in to swipe against mine. I moan into his lips, dragging my nails over his back muscles through his t-shirt. I cry out as his teeth nibble, suck, and scrape their way down my jaw to my neck.

His powerful hands grab the front of my tank top, shoving it up over my breasts before he tears my bra open. I moan as his finger and thumb find an achy, pebbling nipple.

I claw at the hem of his shirt in the slippery madness of the spilled paint, listening to his low, fevered, masculine growls. His shirt and shoes get tossed away. So do mine, followed by my ruined bra.

Bane’s paint-slicked fingers wrap around my throat as his mouth slides down to my nipples, taking one between his teeth and biting. I scream in

pleasure, my back arching off the mess beneath us as my eyes roll back in my head. I reach for his belt, but he's suddenly licking and sucking his way down the hollow of my stomach as he starts to peel my jeans off without even undoing them first. Denim scrapes across my hips, his hot breath teasing down from my navel…

I wince.

"*Wait,*" I groan, grabbing his hair. "Bane…"

He ignores me, wrenching the jeans down my legs and sliding them off before I can stop him. He's pushing his huge frame between my legs and reaching for my panties when my voice cuts through the madness.

"*Stop*!" I blurt, clawing at his shoulders and his hair, trying to drag him back up. "You don't want to—"

"Oh, I can promise you," he rasps, sliding back up just long enough to kiss me until my lips hurt and my breath catches, "*I do*."

His muscled body slides back down mine, his fingers hooking into the front of my panties.

"*I'm on my period!*" I blurt.

Bane yanks my panties down to my knees.

"*Bane*—!"

"I heard you," he murmurs. He starts to nibble up the inside of my thigh, growling and shoving my legs apart when I try to close them.

"No, I'm *literally*—"

"And I literally don't give a fuck."

I watch in horror as this man *reaches for the string of my tampon*…

…*PULLS IT OUT*…

…and tosses it behind him onto the canvas we're tangled across.

He looks up at me, his gaze holding my wide, stunned one, and then lowers his mouth to my pussy.

“You think I just want the clean and tidy version of you?” he growls, biting the tender apex of my thighs, right next to my pussy. “You should know, little bird…”

His mouth dips to my wetness.

“*Red is my favorite fucking color*.”

I cry out when his tongue drags up my seam, opening my lips and then dragging over my clit. My body writhes, my hips lifting up to his face as he pushes his tongue deep inside me.

“*Bleed for me, baby*,” he murmurs, tonguing my clit as he hums against me.

Holy *fuck*, this man.

My back arches as a broken, haunted sound of pleasure wrenches from my throat. I moan, twisting on the sticky wet paint at my back, feeling it coat my skin and matt my hair. Bane lies shirtless between my thighs, growling and hungrily devouring my pussy as I gasp and whine for more more *more*.

His lips wrap around my clit, his low, deep groans vibrating against me as he swirls his tongue over the swollen bud. I scream, thrashing about, knocking over more shit and *not caring at all* as my fingers spear into his hair.

“*Bane—*!”

The orgasm comes out of nowhere, ripping through me as my entire body arches off the mess. My legs kick and shake and finally give out, my heels skidding through slick paint as I come hard against his mouth.

He kicks his jeans off and slides up between my legs. His mouth is bloody…and maybe this is sick…but it doesn’t stop me from wrapping my arms around his neck and yanking him down to me.

I sear my lips to his just as he centers his *huge* monster dick at my entrance. He slides in wetly, my pussy so slippery with my cum and my blood that he

easily buries his thick length to the hilt inside me. I scream into his mouth, clawing and clinging to him, tasting copper on his tongue.

He rams into me hard, thrusting his dick *deep* inside me, touching me in places I didn't even know existed. My head lolls back, my arms still tight around his neck as he pounds into me with deep, brutal thrusts.

His hand slides under us, grabbing my ass and shifting my hips to get a better angle. I cry out, moaning and shaking as Bane fucks the *shit* out of me on the mess of brushes, paint, and blood smeared across the giant canvas beneath.

In and out. In and out. His fat cock reams into me, stretching me to my limit, even though I've had two weeks practice taking him by now. I can feel him in my stomach, and I swear when I look down, I can see a bulge in my abdomen from his cock stroking me on the inside.

Bane grabs and tugs on a handful of my hair, making me scream in pleasure and my eyes roll back. His teeth rake over my throat as he slams into me.

"I'll never get tired of the way this hot little cunt strangles my cock, baby," he snarls against my skin.

My legs wrap around his muscled hips. My pelvis rises and falls, meeting his every thrust as he rams deep, over and over, until my entire reality becomes a blur of raw, unhinged pleasure and the slick sheen of paint on my back.

"*Bane!*" I choke, feeling my entire body quiver and shake and clench tightly around him. "I—!"

"You want to squirt all over my cock again, little bird?" he growls into my ear, biting and licking it as my entire core clenches and ripples. "Do it. Squirt for me, baby," he rasps. "Bleed for me. *Ruin* me. Fuck me up again and again, because I'll never fucking quit you, and it'll never be e-fucking-nough."

He buries his thickness to the balls inside me.

"It'll—"

Thrust.

“Never.”

Thrust.

“Be.”

Thrust.

“Fucking.”

Thrust.

“*Enough*.”

When I come, it’s like something cold and brittle inside me finally shatters and releases. A wall comes down. A barricade burns. A tower crumbles.

And I fucking *break*.

I grab his face and crush my lips to his, tasting his venom and my blood, his fury and my pain. My core explodes, liquid flooding my thighs as Bane buries every huge inch inside me and roars into my mouth. I can feel every pulsing jet of his cum as it spills hot into me, my thighs quivering and tightening around his hips as we ride out the wave until there’s nothing left.

Until we collapse onto the paint and blood smeared across the canvas beneath us.

A beautiful, chaotic mess.

Just like us.

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23

DOVE

I FIGURED OUT HIS SECRET.

I think he knows.

I think he might try to hurt me.

I think he's going to kill me, Boo.

My throat tightens, a shiver finger-walking down my spine as I re-read the entry—one of the last Lark ever made in the diary—for the umpteenth time.

The first time I read it, I freaked. Lark had figured out someone's "secret". She thought "he" was trying to hurt her, maybe even kill her.

…I genuinely thought the man she was talking about was *Bane*.

In fairness, it's not *that* wild a stretch. At least, I didn't think so at the time. When I first read those lines, I had this idea in my head that Bane was a cold, brutal, uncaring monster. But now, having read about the ways my dead friend was so cruel to *him* at times, I've questioned that theory.

Lark used to lie to him. She manipulated his emotions. Made him jealous. Gaslit him into apologizing to her after *she* did terrible shit to *him*. There've even been times when I've pictured Bane snapping. Of the two of them clashing, even though we all thought they were perfect.

But I know now how unfounded that fear was.

I saw Bane as cold and brutal, because that's how he was *to me*.

…Because I took her away from him.

Okay, not me personally. I wasn't the one who locked her in that room, shaved her head, abused her, and killed her. That was all Lorenzo.

But I'm the reason she was there in the first place. And he knows it. *That's* why I always framed him as someone vicious and angry, capable of immense violence.

It's embarrassing now to think that I ever entertained the idea that it was Bane that Lark was afraid of. Bane *does* obviously have a dark viciousness inside him, and an unflinching ability to *use* that viciousness.

But…not like that. I might not remember much of the past, but I *remember* how they were.

Funny enough, when I'm with Bane, I feel how she must have felt when he was with *her*: Utterly protected and safe.

Possessed. Desired.

Needed.

I don't think that's something either of us was expecting. But here we are.

There are other instances in the latter chapters of Lark spiraling: of paranoia and fear strangling her. She wrote about "him" being "on to her". Of "knowing that she figured him out". There are other entries where she was panicking about him hurting or even killing her.

But I no longer secretly worry that the mysterious threat was Bane.

And the more I read straight from the inner depths of my friend's mind, the more I'm coming to realize an uncomfortable truth:

Bane wasn't the villain of their story.

I think that might have been *Lark*.

I'm pretty sure I remember her taking meds for run of the mill anxiety. But I can't recall if there was more to it. I reached out to Melinda the other day to ask if she remembered what meds Lark was on, but her response was a

mix of cluelessness and maybe a little discomfort to be talking about the dead that way.

She's like that.

I even texted Chiara about it, and we *never* talk. But she was so young when Lark died. She couldn't remember anything.

So now I'm left with more questions, and an uncomfortable, jarring reality.

The villain isn't the villain at all.

And the girl I thought of as my other half and my best friend in the world might have been *far* more troubled than I ever dreamed.

* * *

"FUCKING. *SADIST*."

Val is waiting for Evelina and me when we emerge from the changing room after an especially grueling rehearsal that ran late for the gala showcase the Zakharova will be doing later this year. Madame Kuzmina put me through the fucking *paces* for my piece from *Giselle*. Evelina and Val, meanwhile, have been getting grilled as a duo ever since our Stalin-esque Artistic Director decided they'd be dancing the "Seduction" Pas de Deux from *Carmen*.

It's slightly amusing casting, on the face of it. The piece is supposed to be *dripping* with steamy, sizzling sexual energy. Meanwhile, Val is in a committed relationship with a man who happens to be Evelina's *brother*. And Evie is, well…

Evie.

You can't say the word "penis" in front of her without her going beet red.

The two of them are like siblings at this point. They probably *will* be siblings—well, siblings-in-law—if Val and Roman get married, which is almost certainly happening.

All this is to say, their ultra-sensual dance is going to be not only a showcase of their dance abilities but also a feat of acting prowess.

“You two looked good out there today,” I say honestly.

I mean, any awkward dynamic aside, Val and Evie are both *very* talented dancers. Val’s somehow able to channel his normally chaotic, excited-puppy energy into pure grace on stage. And Evelina, as sheltered and innocent as she is, becomes the epitome of feminine sensuality.

Sadist though she is, Madame Kuzmina nailed the casting of this.

Evie blushes, smiling at me. “You think? I dunno…” She blushes deeper as she darts a look at Val. “I mean…it’s a little awkward, with all the…you know…”

“*Sexy* vibes?” Val grins at her, waggling his brows. I giggle, but poor Evie groans, burying her face in her hands.

I elbow her affectionately. “You’re doing great. Don’t get all in your head about it. You looked flawless today.”

She grins at me. “Thanks, Dove. It’s just…a little weird, I guess.”

“Why, because I’m boning your brother?”

I roll my eyes, trying not to giggle as I turn to glare at Val. “Could you *not*?”

“No, I couldn’t,” he sighs. “It’s impossible for me to stop boning Roman. He’s just *way* too hot, and his *ass*—”

“VAAAAAAAL!” Evie groans, turning scarlet.

I sigh, shooting him a warning look. “You know what I meant,” I grin. “Quit messing with her.”

He winks at me. “*Fine*…I guess.”

This is another newer thing for me. I don’t normally do so well with making guy friends, but I’ve been chummy enough with Val since I joined the Zakharova.

Part of it is that he’s close to the group of girls I fell in with. But also, Val’s gone out of his way to make me feel comfortable. It’s not a sexuality thing—not like I’ve marked him “safe” simply because he dates men. Val’s bi, anyway. I saw him with *plenty* of girls before he and Roman crashed together.

I guess I just need to have safety proven to me, and he's…done that.

The three of us walk through the empty auditorium toward the side fire exit of the theater.

“I have an idea, Evie,” Val suddenly pipes up. He turns to wink at her. “Just pretend I’m Vaughn.”

Vaughn is Val’s slightly older but *incredibly* similar-looking brother. I’ve barely talked to him, but from the brief, passing interactions we’ve had, that’s where the similarity ends, though.

Val is an infectiously hyper ball of energy, all charming smiles.

Vaughn is the opposite.

He’s cold and calculating, as if his every move and word is specifically chosen to send a message. He’s one of those people who when he enters a room, everyone *in* that room immediately feels the chilling effect of his presence.

Which tracks, because he’s the head of something called the Obsidian Syndicate, which to the best of my knowledge is some shadowy underworld organization that no one really knows much about, Val included.

Bottom line, there’s something sinister and calculating about the guy that legit creeps me out a little.

Evie’s face goes *very* dark when Val brings him up.

“W-what?” she stammers.

“Why not?” Val grins. “I mean, he looks just like me. So you get all *this*…” He drags a hand with a flourish over his torso and his grinning face. “But, you know, *straight*.” He shrugs. “Yeah. Just pretend it’s Vaughn’s hands all over you.”

Evie’s face throbs as she looks away.

I hear a chime, with jerks my attention to where Val has just turned his phone back on after it being off for rehearsal. I reach for mine just as Evie’s turns back on with a similar ping.

I use my hip to bump the back door open.

“Holy *fuck*...”

It feels like slow motion as I push the door wide and lift my eyes to Val. His face is white and his eyes bulging as they slide from his phone to *me*.

“Dove…”

Evie chokes my name, staring at her phone, then me.

My brows puzzle. “What—”

The roar of people screaming my name hits me like a sledgehammer, ripping me out of that slowed-down moment as I whirl in shock.

Holy shit.

There’s easily thirty people in the alley behind the Mercury Theater shoving cameras and microphones into my stunned face .

What the fuck…

“DOVE!!” A woman screams, her microphone almost slamming into my mouth before I jerk my head away. A camera flashes brightly, then another, blinding me as I blink and stumble sideways.

“MS. MARCHETTI! ANY RESPONSE TO THE VICTIM’S FAMILY?!”

“MS. MARCHETTI! DO YOU HAVE ANY COMMENT ON THE ALLEGATIONS?!”

“DOVE! Have you spoken to the Cielo family?!”

The name rips into me like a knife through flesh, slashing through vein, sinew and bone, leaving me standing in shock at the back door to the theater.

Cielo.

As in *Lorenzo* Cielo.

The Barber.

The monster who took Lark from me that night.

The mob presses in on me. I cry out, shielding myself with my arms as I try to stumble away, but there's no escape. The crowd has somehow flanked me, blocking my way back to the theater. More screamed questions, my name, microphones, flashing cameras…surrounding me, *drowning* me.

"Come on!!"

I flinch when a strong arm wraps around me, yanking me tight against a muscled body. My eyes jerk to the side, my pulse spiking. I exhale when I realize it's Val.

"*Stay close!!"* he roars in my ear, shoving his way through the reporters. He snarls, kicking, throwing elbows, and eventually even landing a wild punch that knocks one of the reporters down. "Get the fuck back!!" he bellows. "FUCK OFF, ALL OF YOU!! Let her the fuck—"

An even stronger hand clamps down like iron on my other arm. I scream, whirling with a fist raised—

Bane's jet-black eyes clash with mine, his face taut, his mouth grim. I choke out a cry of relief as he pulls me close.

"I got her!!" he roars at Val, who releases me with a curt nod. "Make sure Evelina is okay!!"

Val flashes Bane a thumbs-up sign, then glances at me. "Get her the fuck out of here!" he yells at Bane.

Then he disappears back into the throng of reporters to find Evelina.

Bane's big arms scoop around me, shielding me on all sides as he shoves us through the crowd.

"MS. MARCHETTI!! Have you talked to the Cielo family?!"

“Any comment about the new allegations!?”

My entire body is trembling and shaking. I cling to Bane’s chest as he half-pushes, half-carries me through the crowd, until we get to the passenger side of a sleek black vintage Mustang. He yanks the door open, but it’s suddenly slammed shut as a reporter inserts himself between us and it, making me scream.

“DOVE!!” the man yells, jamming a digital voice recorder into my face. “Do you have anything to say for your—”

Blood explodes from the guy’s lip and the recorder flies out of his hand as he gets knocked sideways from the force of Bane’s fist.

“*Get in!!*” Bane roars, wrenching the door open and bundling me inside.

“Ms. Marchetti!”

“Dove!!”

“Do you have any comment?!”

“Have you retained legal counsel?!”

The door between me and the chaos is about to close when the final question slips through and drives into my heart like a knife.

“Dove! Did you really help kidnap and murder Lark Peltier?!”

The door shuts with a heavy *thunk* that echoes in the sudden emptiness in my chest. Bane jumps behind the wheel, gunning the engine and sending the reporters scattering as he peels out of the alley onto East 49th Street.

I’m not even aware of the traffic honking. Of the city streaking by.

Of Bane’s hand reaching over to grip mine tightly, or of anything he’s saying.

“Dove! Did you really help kidnap and murder Lark Peltier?!”

Up has become down. Black is white.

And suddenly, I’m lost in a nightmare.

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24

BANE

"THANKS FOR COMING on such short notice."

Taylor nods, brushing a lock of red behind her ear. "Of course, Bane. We've worked with your father for years," she says, dipping her chin at Dad, standing next to me, "and I'm more than happy to help with this…*delicate* situation."

Taylor Crown is the "Crown" in Crown and Black, the most prestigious and "fuck-you" legal firm in New York. Dad's used them forever, and they also do *plenty* of legal work for other prominent mafia and bratva families in the city, including the Reznikov Bratva, the Kildare Irish Mafia, and the Greek Drakos family.

Taylor's own husband is Drazen Krylov, one of the most feared, respected, and powerful bratva *pakhans* in the world.

But the firm's clout doesn't just come from the underworld families they do business with. Taylor herself is a *beast* of a lawyer, with an insane win record in court. The other founding partner, Alistair Black, is just as cutthroat. And *his* brother, Gabriel, the third founding partner, is only on sabbatical from the firm so he can pursue his current career as *governor* of the goddamn state.

When you need the very best, *this* is who you call. And right now, yeah… We need the best.

The Cielo family, whose dead, piece-of-shit son was *Lorenzo*, aka The Barber, decided that today would be a good day to hold an impromptu press conference announcing that the private investigator they'd hired had found credible evidence linking my fiancée to *their fucking son*.

That's bad enough. But they didn't stop there.

Their second claim is that not only was she in cahoots with Lorenzo, it was *she* who killed her friend. Not him.

It's obviously bullshit and a beyond pathetic attempt at yanking back some limelight. Years ago, when all of this was unfolding, that's exactly how Lorenzo's family operated. On the one hand, his mother was up there sobbing on fucking TV about her son's innocence, and how he was "failed by the system". But on the other, right after her sob-fest she'd be trying to land a publisher for her "tell-all" book about "my son, the killer". Lorenzo's fucking brother tried leveraging the publicity of the horrendous crimes to sell cryptocurrency, for fuck's sake.

These people are shameless, and I know this is just another disgusting attempt to make a buck. But it has the potential to be very bad for us.

"Just how worried should we be?" I growl, glancing at Taylor.

She tips her head. "Well, it's potentially…complicated. The Cielo family has a sympathetic ear in the DA's office. My sources there say there's a newer prosecutor—an asshole called Wilkes—who's willing to open an investigation."

I swear under my breath. Dad's firm hand lands heavily on my shoulder.

"It's obvious she had nothing to do with *her own fucking kidnapping*," I snap. "Are these people too stupid to remember that *she* was locked in the next room over with her own head fucking shaved?!"

Taylor's frowns, thinking. "If I were them, I'd probably go after the connection between Lorenzo and the Marchetti family," she says quietly. "I'm almost positive that's their angle, actually."

"Cesare buried that pretty well," I growl.

Taylor nods. “That he did. But even the most bulletproof NDA’s have their weaknesses, and they don't hold up in criminal cases. If Wilkes takes this the distance and it becomes a criminal investigation, it *will* come out that Lorenzo worked for the family as a driver. From there, it’s wouldn’t be hard for someone to try to link Dove to Ms. Peltier’s killer.” She frowns. “I… have a delicate question.”

“Shoot.”

She frowns and nods past me.

“Is Dove on any medications?”

I scowl, turning to follow her gaze to where my fiancée is sitting on a couch by the window with Chiara.

Apparently, Cesare had more important shit to do than be here.

My dad clears his throat, “I’ll, uh, be over here,” he murmurs, patting my shoulder again and then walking away to talk with Sergey in the corner.

I turn back to Taylor. “Yeah, she is.”

“Anything an asshole prosecutor could turn into a problem?”

“Two different anti-anxiety meds, lithium, risperidone, Zoloft, lorazepam—”

“*Fuck*,” Taylor mutters, wincing. “Okay, not great, but I can work with that.”

My brow furrows. “Is she going to be charged with something?”

Taylor purses her lips. “Let’s hope not. But even if she is, it’s just the next step, not an automatic L.” She smiles quietly. “Look, Bane, my professional guess here is that this is just the Cielo family looking for some attention. Even if there *is* something this PI of theirs found…” She frowns. “Evidence collected by PIs is *notoriously* unusable in court due to lack of chain of custody. I doubt there’s anything anyway, though.”

I wrap things up with Taylor and she leaves. Dad comes over to tell me it’s going to be okay, and then he and Sergey take off, too.

“Bane?”

I turn to see Chiara standing in front of me, her brow furrowed and her bottom lip caught between her teeth as she looks up at me.

“Can you do me a favor?”

I nod. “Of course.”

She exhales. “Look, I know she’s got her issues and is a complete psycho sometimes. But…” She smiles wryly. “She’s still my sister. Take care of her?”

“Always,” I growl quietly.

Chiara leaves, and then it’s just the two of us.

“I have to ask you something.”

There’s a fractured note in her voice as she looks up at me.

“And before you say ‘*anything, Dove*,’ just…” She winces. “Just let me say it first.” She looks away, out the window. “I realize asking you this when it’s just the two of us is ridiculous. But I’m asking because I hope I already know the answer. If I’m wrong, well…” She smiles wryly as she turns back to me. “Guess I’m fucked.”

My brow knits. “What’s going on, little bird.”

She takes a shaky breath and looks right up at me.

“Did you ever plan to hurt or kill Lark?”

The whole room goes quiet as the sharpness of her question sinks into my chest. Part of me almost wants to laugh, like this is a joke I’m not quite getting. But then I see the haunted look in her eyes and the tremble in her jaw, and something in me breaks.

I take a step closer. My heart twists when she flinches.

I drop to my knees in front of her. I don’t touch her, but I’m close enough that I could.

“No,” I growl quietly, shaking my head. “No.”

I don’t add “Of course not” or “Are you crazy”. I can tell from the broken look in her eye and the fragile note in her voice that she already thinks that of *herself*.

So, I just tell her the truth.

“No,” I murmur, gently placing my hands on her knees. “Not once. Never.”

She exhales a shaking, shuddering breath, her shoulders caving. She nods quietly, staring at my hands.

“Can I ask you another question?”

“You can ask me a million of them, little bird.”

Her lips twist as she glances away. “Do you…” Her brows furrow before her dark eyes slip to mine. “Do you think I’m crazy?”

There’s something so vulnerable in her voice, like she’s afraid of the answer.

“I was kidnapped when I was nine years old.”

The silence is *deafening* as her eyes snap to mine.

“My dad had a business deal go sour with an Armenian family," I say. "In retaliation, they tracked me down in the park with my nanny, broke her jaw, shot the men guarding us, and took me.”

My eyes close as my hand slides up her thighs until my fingers lace with hers.

“I was held in a basement for two weeks. No sunlight. No fresh air. A bucket for a bathroom, and just water and bread, sometimes an apple to eat.” A cold sensation drags through my chest. “I still fucking hate apples, actually.”

When I open my eyes, my heart breaks a little. She’s crying silently, her eyes red, her face crumpled.

“Eventually, my dad’s men found me. They slaughtered the men who’d taken me, and took me home, and everyone told me I was rescued. That I was *fine* now, and everything was going to be okay.”

I shake my head.

“But you and I both know how stupid a statement that is. It’s never fine, or okay. Nothing ever goes back to normal.” My jaw tenses as I reach up to cup her face, my thumb stroking away a tear as it rolls down her cheek. “You never leave the room in which you were imprisoned. Not really. We’re both always going to be in there. The trick is, living your life *in spite of it all*.”

I lean forward until our foreheads are touching.

“So, no, baby,” I murmur. “I don’t think you’re crazy. I think you’re surviving…and you’re fucking *killing it* at that, for what it’s worth.”

She chokes out a broken laugh, tears rolling down her cheeks as she clutches my face. She leans in and kisses me hard, sobbing into my lips as I kiss her back. One of her hands drifts back to her own face, her fingers sliding over my hand. She pulls it from her cheek and drags it down to her neck. It’s not until she’s curling my fingers around her throat that I realize what she’s doing.

“If it’s not this,” she chokes, “then it’s going to be me cutting, or finding a way back up to a roof, or fucking using again.” Her haunted eyes hold mine, full of pain and need and sadness. “So please, Bane…” she tightens my fingers around her throat. “Fuck me, and fuck me your way.”

I groan as I squeeze her throat, feeling her pulse jackrabbiting when I lean in to brush her lips with mine.

“*Do your worst,*” she chokes quietly. “*Please*.”

“Do you remember your safe word?”

Her eyes lock with mine, her teeth raking over her lip.

“Tonight, I don’t want to.”

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DOVE

Lark would get such a kick out of this.

Either that, or she'd hate me forever. But I'm choosing to believe she'd see the funny side if she were to walk in right now.

Me, in a wedding dress.

Marrying *Bane*.

In about…forty minutes.

I exhale as I look at myself draped I white tulle and lace in the mirror. Fuck, I *hope* Lark would see the humor in this, at least. But maybe she *would* hate me.

The wedding is a small affair, being held at Nikolai Antonov's lavish Bronx mansion. There's no pomp and circumstance, no crowds of friends and family. On "my side", the only people in attendance are my dad, Cunt-Face and her little shit of a dog, Melinda, because I asked her to come, and Chiara, which oddly makes me feel a little bit better.

I dunno. We might not be close, but she's still my half-sister.

On Bane's side, it's just his dad, Sergey, and curiously, Alfred, his butler.

It does seem a bit silly to have a ceremony, given that this entire thing is essentially a business transaction. Still, it *is* going to be a real marriage.

I swallow, looking at myself in the mirror.

That's the part that hasn’t actually sunk in yet: after today, I will *actually*, legally, be married.

My eyes meet my gaze in the mirror, and my face heats as a smile teases the corners of my lips.

Two months ago, even a few weeks ago, today might have felt like a final nail being driven into my coffin. But as I stand here, readying myself to walk down the aisle to become *Mrs. Bane Antonov*, I don’t feel any sense of dread.

I’m not delusional, of course. I’ve seen the cold underbelly of the world enough to understand reality when I see it. I’m aware that even though Bane and I fuck *a lot*, in extremely hardcore and you could say extra intimate ways, that doesn’t mean we’re, well…whatever it is when two people *really* get married.

But I don’t feel like we’re enemies. And I don’t think of him as the villain anymore.

Well, *a* villain, perhaps. Maybe even *my* villain. But not the villain of our story.

I roll my eyes at myself when I catch myself thinking “our story” on my fucking wedding day.

Okay, Lark would *definitely* get a kick out of this.

There's a firm knock on the door of the library that I’ve been using as a dressing room.

“Yes?”

“May I come in, Dove?”

I frown curiously as I turn to the sound of Bane’s dad’s voice on the other side of the door. “Uh, sure. Be my guest.”

The door opens, and Nikolai steps in. He’s a good-looking man, probably in his early fifties, with hair *just* silvering at the temples, an athletic, fit build, and the same dark eyes as his son. Different mouth and chin, though—

Bane’s come from his mother. I’ve been looking at the few pictures of her in the library as I’ve been getting ready.

Nikolai smiles warmly at me as he closes the door behind, looking *very* dapper in his tailored suit. The age lines around his eyes only give him a more distinguished look as he grins at me and slowly shakes his head.

“You look stunning, my dear.”

I smile awkwardly. “Thanks,” I say shyly. I glance down at myself. “It’s not too much? I mean, you know…for *this*.”

Nikolai chuckles. “By *this*, you mean…” He cocks a brow. “A *fake* marriage?”

My mouth twists. “Well…yeah.”

“Does it feel fake?”

The question catches me off-guard, and I feel myself hesitate as I search for the right words. Bane's dad just shakes his head.

“Didn’t mean to put you on the spot. Anyway, to answer you…” He eyes me up and down—not in a creepy or lecherous way, more like a father who’s proud of you.

Please note my *actual* father hasn’t made an appearance to say hi or anything yet. But, par for the course, I guess.

Nikolai smiles. “No, Dove, I don’t think it’s too much. I think you look stunning.” He chuckles again. “*Too* stunning for my mopey son, frankly.”

I find myself laughing as he winks at me.

“How are you feeling?”

My brows knit. “About?”

He shrugs, looking around. “About all of this. The wedding, marriage, the whole bit.”

It surprises me that he *cares*. In my mind, this whole arrangement has been a business transaction between him and my father, and people conducting

business transactions rarely ask the goods being traded how they feel about it.

“I…” I smile, shaking my head. “Honestly, I don’t know. I think I’ve been seeing it as this thing in the distance for so long, and now it’s here, and it…” I trail off.

“Doesn’t seem real?”

“Pretty much,” I grin.

Nikolai smirks. “Want me to let you in on a little secret?”

“*Please*,” I laugh.

“It never does.” He shrugs. “Feel real, that is. Weddings, marriage…even when it’s to the person you’ve dreamed about marrying for years. When I think back to my wedding to Bane’s mother?” He smiles, a sad but also happy look in his eyes. “I felt like I was in a goddamn dream…” He exhales sharply. “Anyway, I just wanted to look in on you before it all started, and to tell you that I’m really looking forward to getting to know you, Dove.” He smiles warmly. “It might sound corny, but I’ve always wanted a daughter. And now I get to have one.”

Well, *fuck*.

Who’s cutting onions?

I inhale, fanning my face madly so I don’t ruin my makeup. Nikolai chuckles, pulling a handkerchief out of his jacket and walking over to hand it to me. I blurt a grateful thank you, and he watches as I dab at my eyes *very* carefully.

“Can I ask you something?”

He nods. “Of course.”

My gaze drags to his. “Is there anything I should know? About Bane, I mean.”

His brow furrows for a second. “That’s…a complicated question.” His hand comes up, and he runs his fingers across his chiseled jaw as he nods slowly.

“I mean, he’s a more complicated guy than you might think at first. At the same time, he’s not *that* complicated, if that makes sense. I think he lives by a code.”

I frown. “A code?”

He smiles. “Nothing crazy. He just holds himself to a certain set of principles. He’s loyal, and fiercely protective of the people he loves.” He smiles, a look of pride flickering across his face. “He’s got a definite savior complex, and has his issues.” He grins. “But he’s a good kid. A good man.”

I find myself smiling at the pride in his tone.

Nikolai rolls his eyes. “Look at me, getting all emotional and fawning, I just —” He makes a face, swallowing a few times before he clears his throat. “Shit, sorry,” he grunts. “Dry throat.”

“I’m on it.”

I turn and click-clack over to the vanity that I’m guessing Nikolai had set up for me in here with, among other things, a bottle of water and some glasses on a tray. I pour a glass for him, and I rush to get it to him as he coughs again. As I do, I manage to bump the stool next to the vanity.

Shit.

It goes crashing to the ground, together with my handbag. My face throbs with embarrassment as the contents spill over the floor—makeup, a freaking tampon, my two-year sobriety token, and...

FUCK.

A couple of orange plastic pill bottles.

They roll across the floor and knock against Nikolai’s polished dress shoes.

“Shit,” I blurt. “I—”

“Please, allow me.”

Before I can stop him, Bane’s dad crouches down and plucks up the bottles of lithium and lorazepam, *and* the fucking sobriety coin.

He stands, staring at the things in his hand a second too long before he glances at me. “Sorry,” he murmurs, frowning as he gives them back. “Didn’t mean to pry.”

“No, it’s…it’s fine,” I mumble, my face throbbing as I awkwardly take them.

I finish stuffing everything back into my bag before I glance back at Nikolai, who now knows I’m a crazy fuckup.

I mean, *I am.* But fuck, it felt so nice just now, with him being so excited to welcome me into his family, and—

“Just one milligram lorazepam?”

My eyes snap to his, ready for the snarky comment or look of pity.

“Personally, I’m a two-milligram-a-day man myself.”

I stare. Nikolai grins. “I’ve dealt with anxiety my whole life. Can’t say my choice of profession did much to help, but…” He shrugs and levels a look at me. “Don’t ever be ashamed to fix what isn’t working inside you, Dove. Nobody feels they need to hide the cast on their broken leg, or the antibiotics to knock out a sinus infection. Mental health shouldn’t be any different. And if anyone gives you shit for it?” He winks. “*Fuck ‘em*.”

I grin widely.

“Also—and I hope I’m not overstepping here—if you ever want a *great* shrink, the woman I see is *fantastic.* I’ve been going to her for something like fifteen years, and I’d be happy to introduce the two of you.”

I nod. “That would be…really nice.”

He nods. “Oh, and congrats.” His brows arch. “Two years is damn impressive.”

No judgement. No looking down on me because I’m a junkie or a drunk.

…I think I’m *really* going to like my father-in-law.

I smile, my cheeks heating. “Thanks so much, Mr. Antonov.”

He laughs loudly. “Dove, you’re going to be family in…” He glances at the Rolex on his wrist. “About eighteen minutes. I think Nikolai works, don’t you?”

I grin. “Sure, thanks.”

He walks over and takes my hands in his, smiling at me. “One last thing.”

I smile. “Yeah?”

“If my kid fucks up, let me know so I can knock some sense into him.”

I giggle. “Deal.”

Nikolai gives me a warm, fatherly hug, and my heart swells as I hug him back.

Then, soon enough, it’s time.

It’s not like my dad offered anyway, but I end up walking myself down the short aisle in Nikolai’s back yard where the ceremony is being held despite the chill in the air. Bane’s wearing a black suit, black dress shirt and black tie, and it’s so fucking perfect and *him* that I grin as I step up to him.

He grins right back.

He *never* smiles like this.

“You look fucking incredible,” he murmurs under his breath.

“So do you,” I blush. I glance at the stone wall beside us with the arch motif carved into it, the whole thing *covered* in gorgeous pink climbing roses. “These are stunning,” I murmur quietly.

“My mother planted them,” Bane says, taking my hands in his.

For some reason, that really touches me, and I smile widely.

It makes me feel like his mom is here with us, watching over us today.

…And maybe *mine* is, too.

I had thought the Antonov family would push for a Russian Orthodox ceremony. But it turns out neither Bane nor is father is very religious, and

they were more than happy with my dad's request for a Catholic priest.

The service is quick.

A feeling that *might* be excitement bubbles up inside me as Bane repeats his vows. Then it's my turn.

Fuck me. I *am* excited.

My heart beats faster, my breath coming quickly until finally, the priest presents us to the assembled guests as man and wife.

I shiver when Bane cups my face with this *perfect* mix of softness and possessiveness. His dark eyes blaze as he lowers his mouth.

His lips sear to mine, and for one blissful second, the entire world is just… *perfect*.

Good.

Sweet.

Uncomplicated.

And then quite suddenly, it's not.

"HANDS! I NEED TO SEE HANDS! EVERYONE!"

I shudder, Bane and I whirling as men in dark blue windbreakers come storming around the side of the house with guns drawn.

"Federal Marshals! I need everyone to freeze, and I need to see hands! NOW!"

My dad is screaming and yelling, demanding to know what's going on. Felicity is doing the same thing, but even louder. And that *fucking dog* of hers is yapping up a storm.

Nikolai frowns, but he's got his hands in the air along with everyone who *isn't* Felicity or my dad as he turns to the guy in charge.

"This is private family occasion," he growls. "May I ask what the hell—"

"*Dove Marchetti*!"

Everything in my body freezes: my thoughts, my pulse, my breath. My heart clenches as everyone turns to look at me.

“Dove Marchetti,” the man barks as he marches over brandishing a piece of paper. “This is a warrant for your arrest.”

Other agents suddenly swarm me. Bane roars as I’m pulled away from him. He snarls and goes to shove them aside but Nikolai grabs him and pulls him back.

My hands are yanked behind my back and handcuffed. I go numb, my eyes wide and panicked as they snap to Bane’s.

“Arrest? For fucking *what*!” my husband roars at the man in charge.

The guy turns to look right at me.

“For the murder of Lorenzo Cielo.”

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BANE

THE ROOM IS SOMBER and cold.

Not exactly the mood I had in mind for our wedding night, but here we are.

It's been six hours since the Marshals stormed my dad's backyard and arrested my wife.

A small smile glints at the corners of my mouth. Despite all the chaos that's gone down over the last several hours, even just thinking that word has a certain feeling clicking into place inside me that I wasn't expecting.

My wife.

My WIFE.

Obviously, I posted bail to get her the fuck home. And now she's sitting on the couch in my living room, still in her wedding dress. Her makeup is smudged, and her eyes look hollow. Her hair, which was up in a really pretty creation for the ceremony, has fallen down, framing her face in pink and blonde.

She *still* looks stunning.

She always has, of course. Always was gorgeous. But there's something about the monsters and the bitterness she's battled over the last seven years that have turned her from a pretty girl into a beautiful woman.

Like the pain and the destruction made her defiant and fierce.

…Even if she doesn’t look like either of those right now.

Taylor’s here with Fumi, an equity partner at Crown and Black who also happens to be the wife of Gabriel Black, the founding partner turned Governor. She and Taylor are talking quietly near me. I’m not listening, though. I'm looking at my wife. My dad is kneeling in front of her, patting the back of her hand as he murmurs what I’m guessing are comforting words.

He’s good at that, in a way I don't know that I am.

I watch as my bride throws her arms around his neck, hugging him fiercely.

Sometimes I wonder if that’s all she’s ever needed. A family that gave a shit. Love. A fucking *hug*. Cesare has never once given her any of that.

Dad pats her hand again and then stands. He turns and walks over to me, laying a hand heavily on my shoulder.

“I’m going to go,” he growls. “Taylor’s the best, and so is Fumi. You’re in good hands there.” His brow furrows. “Bane, if you need *anything*…”

“Thank you,” I murmur, pulling him in for a hug.

When he’s gone, the room goes quiet for a moment before Taylor clears her throat and takes center stage.

“Let’s start with the basics,” she says, her voice soft but still firm and confident. “The Cielo family’s private investigator *did* manage to dig up some new evidence regarding Lorenzo’s death. Dove, as you may recall, your father greased a lot of palms to speed things up when he was trying hide any connections between Lorenzo and your family, including Lorenzo's past employment as your father's chauffeur. I can also tell you that the coroner at the time, now retired, was almost certainly paid. His report was made barely a day after Lorenzo’s body was brought to him, when the process typically takes four or five.” She turns to Fumi with a deft nod.

“The autopsy report was originally sealed at the request of the Cielo family,” Fumi begins, her dark brows pinching. “They’re Jehovah’s Witnesses, and objected to the entire post-mortem examination on religious

grounds. However, Jeff Brogawski, the Cielo's PI, was able to make an appeal on behalf of the family to the DA, claiming Lorenzo's death was suspicious." She arches a brow. "As you can imagine, Dove, the DA isn't that kindly disposed toward your family, so he acquiesced. Now, the official report lists Lorenzo's cause of death as 'multiple gunshot wounds due to gangland violence'."

As in, the fucker was shot about two dozen times by Cesare's men when they crashed in the front door. Of course, they also managed to send a few rounds through a wall into the back room where Lorenzo was cooking *meth*, which is what started the fire and later led to the explosion that brought the house down on top of everyone, leading to the memory loss.

"*However*," Taylor takes over again, nodding at Fumi, "with the autopsy report re-opened, it's been noted that in addition to the eighteen gunshot wounds, Lorenzo's body was found with a laceration across his pharynx." She glances at the rest of us. "In other words: his throat was cut."

My brows knit. "*What*?"

Taylor shoots me a look. "Exactly. When the Cielo's gave that impromptu press conference the other day, all they had was the hasty report that Cesare Marchetti almost certainly paid a state medical examiner to make, not the bit about the sliced throat. Their insane claim…" Taylor's face crumples a little as she glances at my wife. "I'm so sorry… We have to talk about this, Dove."

She nods, smiling weakly. "It's fine."

Taylor clears her throat. "Their claim that you had something to do with Ms. Peltier's death was a Hail Mary. They're trying to get Lorenzo's crimes cleared by claiming he was merely cooking methamphetamine in that house, and that you, Dove, were the kidnapper and killer. Which is *absurd*, and will never stand up in court. But when the media got hold of it, they misinterpreted it…as, I'm sad to say, the media frequently does…and came up with the equally insane theory that you were working *with* Lorenzo."

I suddenly realize I'm still standing across the room, not at my wife's side where I should be.

I fix that instantly, striding over to sit beside her. My palm goes flat to the small of her back, slowly rubbing in small circles as I reach over with my other hand and take both of hers in my grip.

“What’s changed,” Fumi says, her dark eyes fixed on the two of us, “is that this PI’s re-investigation into the events of that night unearthed a piece of evidence that was deemed peripheral before—a knife, with blood on it, found at the scene near Lorenzo’s remains. Obviously, the blood was DNA tested before, and it came up as Lorenzo’s. Since the *entire* scene was covered in his blood—albeit, burned—investigators listed the knife as a defense weapon Lorenzo was probably holding when he was gunned down. *But*, with the discovery of the laceration to the throat, the Cielo family had that knife tested again.”

She glances at Taylor, who slowly turns to the two of us sitting on the couch.

“Dove,” Taylor says quietly. “They found a second set of DNA in the new test. It’s badly degraded, but it would be admissible in court.”

Her gaze flits to me, then drags back to my wife.

“That second set of DNA is *yours*.”

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DOVE

I'VE NEVER FELT "NORMAL" since the night everything died.

Lark. My old life. My memories. My very identity.

I had to relearn everything about who I was. What I liked or didn't. How other people viewed me.

Some of those lessons were harder than they should have been, like wanting to eat raspberries so badly and then realizing the second I popped one in my mouth that I actually *couldn't* because I had a mild sensitivity to them that made my lips blow up.

I cried so hard that day you'd have thought I'd just lost a loved one.

Conversely, there were things that should have been heartbreaking that were just…*easy*.

Like Scott.

He'd been my boyfriend for almost two years. I'd lost my *virginity* to him, for fuck's sake. I'm assuming at some point or another, I'd told him I loved him.

But when he came to visit me in the hospital, roses and teddy bear in hand, I felt *nothing* for him. Like he was a stranger. Not a stranger I wanted to remember, like Chiara. A stranger I was happy to keep walking past on the street.

I broke up with him officially a week later, when I went home. And I didn’t shed a single tear.

Nothing about any of that is “normal”.

But now, things feel even worse.

My life is spiraling out of control, and I can't do squat about it.

Not *all* of it is awful, of course.

There’s Bane, and no matter how this thing with us started, he’s quickly become my tether to reality. The one who grounds me. The rock I cling to when the craziness inside me wants to break me into a hundred psycho little pieces.

Everything else around me keeps changing. He stays exactly the same.

But even with Bane being this hard rock I can hold onto—pun *very much* intended—everything else feels like it’s slipping through my fingers like sand.

I feel like I’m getting worse: mentally, emotionally.

Psychologically.

I’m remembering things that aren’t true. I see glimpses of shadows that aren’t there and hear snippets of conversations that no one is having. I’ve been keeping all of this stuffed down inside me and not telling a single soul, not even Bane, because saying it out loud will cement how fucking real it might be.

Telling *him* means facing the very real possibility that I’m losing my mind.

…Like Lark.

What if I’m more like her than I ever guessed? More than the similar eyes and hair, or the birthdays only a month apart?

What if the corrupting darkness that was inside her is inside *me*, too?

* * *

“KNOCK KNOCK.”

Antonio looks up from what I’m guessing are horse racing stats on his phone when I rap my knuckles on the open door to the DiCampo Street Social Club. He grins around the cigar in his mouth.

“*Ayyy*, *piccola mia*!”

A big smile spreads across my face as I step inside to meet him and he tosses the phone and cigar aside and throws his arms around me in a big hug.

Antonio is half retired now, hence spending most of his time smoking stogies, playing bocci, and gambling on horse races down here at the DiCampo Street Social Club—one of the hundreds of little “private clubs for Italian guys” in Brooklyn. But growing up, he was one of my main bodyguards, which means I’ve spent a *crazy* amount of time with him.

He pulls back from the hug with a huge smile on face. He shakes his head, making a clucking sound with his tongue.

“What’s this I hear about my little *tesoro* being an old married woman now?”

I blush and roll my eyes, raising my hand. The diamond that Bane slipped onto my finger in his dad’s back yard a week ago glints in the light, and Antonio whistles approvingly.

“Okay, I was going to voice my objections to you marrying a *Russian*,” he chuckles, “but it seems he’s treating you good with a ring like that.” His brow furrows. “He *is* treating you good, yes?”

“Yes,” I smile. “And I’m sorry you weren’t at the wedding! It was a small thing with just family—” I frown. “Not that you’re not family—”

“Dove,” Antonio chuckles, shaking his head. “It’s okay.” He looks me up and down with a big smile, then moves back to the easy chair he was sitting in before I arrived. He pats the empty one next to him. “So what’s got a classy, married lady like you coming to see your old nanny?”

I laugh and hold up the cardboard box in my hands. I open the lid, and Antonio groans in pleasure.

“Tell me those are De Farro’s?”

“*Obviously*,” I snort.

He grins widely. “The best bombolini in New York? For me?!”

“Who else?”

Antonio wraps an arm around my shoulders and hugs me. “Atta girl!”

When he looks at me, and sees the way my lip twists, he lifts a brow. “Okay, why *else* did you want to come see me today?”

I glance down at the floor for a moment, then back up at Antonio. “Can I… I wanted to ask you something about that night.”

His smile slowly fades.

He knows what night I mean.

Antonio shakes his head and looks away. “I don’t like talking about that night.”

“Please? I’m trying to remember—”

“Yeah, and I’m trying to *forget*,” he growls. “The sight of you chained to that wall, head shaved, dirty, scared…” He scowls. “I think of that night *all the damn time*. There’s not a day that goes by that I don’t wish I could just forget it.”

Antonio was the first one through the door that night. From what I’ve heard murmured by some of my father’s men, Antonio’s also the one who shot Lorenzo first, right though the head.

“I know,” I say gently, putting a hand on his arm. “But… I really need to know something, and I can’t remember. I need you to remember for me.”

Antonio scowls, but then slowly, looking away from me, he nods. “Okay, what do you want to remember?” he growls.

“You heard about the Cielo family and their—”

“*Fottuti figli di puttana*,” Antonio swears. “Yeah, I heard. Your papa is taking care of that shit, yes?”

I smile and dip my chin. “My *husband* is, yes.”

He nods. “I like this Russian more and more.”

My mouth twists. “Apparently Lorenzo’s throat was cut?”

The words hang heavy in the silence that follows. Slowly, Antonio nods.

“It was. We came in hot, you know? And when I saw that son of a bitch, I just pulled the trigger and didn’t stop until my mag was empty. But…” He looks at me with a dark expression. “Yeah, his neck was cut wide open. Blood fuckin' everywhere.”

I shudder.

“But if these motherfuckers push it,” he growls. “I’ll testify that you were chained up in that room. Not a chance you could’ve done it.”

I smile weakly. “You’ll testify that, or that’s really how it happened?”

Translation: how crazy am I *actually*?

I don’t know.

I really, *really* haven't got a clue anymore if me being the one who cut Lorenzo’s throat is an utterly insane idea or a frighteningly possible one.

Antonio’s brow furrows deeply. “Dove,” he growls, shaking his head. “Don’t listen to those *fottuti figli di puttana*, okay? Don’t let them get in your head.” He takes my hands in his. “You were chained in a locked room. You didn’t kill that man. I don’t know who *did*. Maybe he killed himself.” He shrugs. “I don’t know, and frankly I don’t care. My goal that night was to save you. I did. That piece of shit—” He turns and spits on the floor. “He can burn in hell, no matter how he died.”

My face winces. “And Lark?”

Antonio's face softens. "She was my other goal that night, *tesoro*. You know that," he says quietly. "But I failed. I will never forgive myself for that."

"You *came* for us, though," I choke as I hug him. "There's nothing to forgive."

As comforting as it is to hear that Antonio really did find me chained up and not standing cackling over Lorenzo's body with a knife in my hand, it's also…*not*.

The fact that I had to ask it in the first place is enough to shake me to my core.

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28

DOVE

"DOVE?"

A slim woman with slightly silvering dark hair, maybe in her forties, pokes her head out of the office door. Her blue eyes meet mine through her dark, thick-rimmed glasses, and she smiles when I look up from my magazine.

"Good guess," I grin.

She chuckles in the waiting area of her small midtown office, empty but for me, and opens the door a little wider. "Please, come in. Can I get you tea or coffee or anything?"

"I'm fine, thanks."

She nods, ushering me in before she closes the door. The inner office is brightly lit, with big windows that have partial views of Central Park two blocks away. The walls are gorgeous blonde wood and white paint, giving a very Scandinavian aesthetic. Green plants and a few potted flowers dot the space.

I choose a soft, sage-green couch and Dr. Turov settles into a leather armchair across from me, one ankle resting on the other knee, notepad and pen in her lap.

She smiles. "First, congratulations on your wedding. Nikolai was telling me it was lovely." She pauses. "Well, aside from the obvious."

My mouth twists as I nod. "Thanks."

“I know you’ve been to therapy before, Dove,” Dr. Turov says gently. “So don't worry, I’m not going to patronize you and ask how being arrested at your own wedding *made you feel*,” she chuckles.

Then she clears her throat. “I’ve read your medical history…” She looks up from her notes. “We’re not going to talk about your substance abuse today, either…unless you want to, of course.”

I shake my head. “No, I'm good.”

She glances at her notes again before she looks up at me. “Two years sobriety is *very* impressive, Dove.” She smiles at me. “I hope you realize that. You beat nearly impossible odds, and you should feel very proud.”

My face heats as I smile awkwardly at her. “I…guess I do?”

Dr. Turov smiles. “Good.” She takes a breath. “Today, I just want to establish a baseline. Mind if I ask you a few questions?”

I shake my head.

“Do you feel in control of your life?”

I laugh abruptly, then catch myself. “Sorry,” I mumble. “I mean… I just got married as part of a business arrangement.”

Dr. Turov nods, zero judgement in her eyes. “I work quite closely with a lot of people in the mafia world, Dove. I get it. How do you feel about the marriage?”

I shrug. “I… I don’t know. Different now than I did before.”

“Different how?”

I look down at my hands. “I guess…not as angry or trapped as I was before?”

She nods. “Was that due to a shift in your own thinking, or was it external?”

“I think it’s…” I shrug. “I guess it’s that Bane—Nikolai Antonov’s son, my husband…” I make a face. “You already know all that.”

She just smiles.

I take a shaky breath. “Did you know Bane used to date my dead best friend?”

She hesitates just long enough to let me know she does.

“Nikolai told you?”

She smiles. “I’m afraid I can’t discuss what I talk about with other patients, but, yes, I’m aware of the history between Bane and your friend Lark.” She takes a deep breath. “I think we’re wading into *far* deeper waters than we’ll have time for in just this short session, but is that something you want to talk about in future?”

“Yes?” I frown. “No?” I laugh a little. “I don’t know. I mean, it bothers me, but it also doesn’t. Or I guess, it bothered me more *before*. Now, I think she’d just get a kick out of the fact that I’m *married* to the guy.”

Dr. Turov smiles as she nods. “Good, give me a little more of that. What do you feel when you look at Bane?”

I know what I *should* feel. Fear, maybe. Guilt, *definitely*. Apprehension that he unlocks this vicious, dangerous side of me. And yet—

“Safe.”

The word drops completely uninvited from my lips. Once it’s out there, though, warmth spreads through my chest and a smile creeps over my lips.

“I feel safe with him. I feel…protected. Desired, needed, built up, heard…” I stop abruptly as the words just start pouring out. Heat floods my face and I bite my lip, looking up at her. “Sorry, I…”

“How does it feel to say all that out loud?” she asks softly.

“Good,” I swallow. “*Great*, actually.”

And that warmth inside my chest takes hold, growing, welcoming me into its embrace as I realize how true every single word is.

“I haven’t felt those things in…” I sigh. “I don’t remember if I’ve *ever* felt them.”

Dr. Turov flashes a genuine smile at me. “I’m truly happy for you, Dove. I think you deserve to feel all those things, especially with someone you’ve just married.” She glances down at her notes, then the wall clock. “We don’t have a full session today: this is just an introduction. But if you’d like to keep seeing me—”

“Definitely,” I say quickly.

For sure. I feel more open right now in the fifteen minutes I’ve been here than I have in ages.

“Me too,” she grins. “Now, quickly, I do want to ask you about the meds you’re taking.” Her brows knit as she glances at her notepad. “I’m going to be honest with you, I’m a little shocked by what you’re on, and especially the dosages.” Her brow furrows even deeper, her nose wrinkling a little. “Two hundred milligrams of Zoloft, *six* of risperidone, twenty of Lexapro, *along with* buspirone *and* lorazepam…” She looks at me with concern. “*Sixteen hundred* of lithium?”

I smile weakly. “Is that…a lot?”

Dr. Turov exhales slowly, puffing out her cheeks as she sits back in her chair. “Honestly, Dove, I’m amazed you can even carry on a conversation, being on that much lithium. And all of it together…I worry about interactions.” She frowns. “How do you feel without them?”

I choke out a small laugh. “I…don’t know. I’ve been medicated since I was…I'm not sure. My whole life, I assume?”

Dr. Turov nods slowly, her brows pinched, tapping her chin with the end of her pen. “I want to try something a little unorthodox. Are you game?”

“Definitely.”

She nods. “Good. I want you to stop.”

I frown. “Stop…?”

“All of it. All your meds.”

A blink. “Like…cold turkey?”

"*Christ*, no," she laughs. "I'm going to write you up a schedule for slowly weaning yourself off them over the next couple of weeks."

I frown. "What will that do?"

She smiles. "That's what we're going to find out. But in my professional opinion, you are *hugely* over-medicated right now, and I'd like to see what work we can do together without the meds, or at least a lot less of them. How does that sound?"

It sounds fucking *great.*

* * *

It's dark when I open my eyes. Confusion whips through me like a winter chill, shaking me as I try to focus.

I'm—

My pulse skips.

I'm *home*. Not at Bane's place, but *home*-home, Dad's house, standing in the doorway of my carriage house.

The chill twists and claws under my skin as a panic begins to set in.

How the fuck did I get here?

It's dark out, and the carriage house itself is also dim, leaving me standing in the shadows on the doorstep. I shakily pull out my phone to glance at the time.

What the…

After I left Dr. Turov's, I went to the Mercury to get in a little conditioning. I didn't have rehearsal, because it's Saturday, but I wanted—maybe *needed*—to run, and the theater has a great gym with treadmills down in the basement. After *that*, I met Brooklyn and Evelina for a meal. We laughed that we didn't know whether to call it late lunch or early dinner, and Evie came up with Linner because Dunch just sounded awful.

That was at four-thirty.

It’s now *eight o’clock*, and I’m quickly realizing I don’t know what the hell I just did since leaving the two of them.

How I left the restaurant.

How I got *here*.

A cold sensation drips down my spine.

What the fuck is wrong with me.

I’m about to turn and get the hell out of here when I pause. I frown as I step into my carriage house. Then I stiffen as cold fury washes over me.

Are you fucking kidding me?!

On the one hand, I’m married now and living with Bane, and I’m never going to move back here.

On the other, this was *my space* for so long. It was the soft place I landed when I came back to New York after rehab. Where I collected myself, and put myself out there again. Where I started painting as a means of self-therapy.

It was my sanctuary.

And now, it’s *not*.

At all.

Folding tables and boxes fill the space inside, with giant posters and banners with the bullshit silver and fairy-peach PetalGlow Essentials logo tacked up everywhere. Piles of shitty leggings and tops cover the tables, and boxes and random bottles of vile-smelling oils litter the ground and trail up the stairs to the loft above.

I'm still confused about my timeline, or what I’m doing here, or how I even *got* here. But through the swirling fog, fury ignites in me.

Mother.

Fucking.

Felicity.

The urge to destroy everything I'm looking at, or burn it all to ash, rises in me. But then the fog in my head swirls again, and I find myself grabbing the doorframe.

Fuck this.

Something is wrong with me, and I need to get…

A smile spreads over my face.

Home. I need to get home to Bane.

Where I feel safe. Where I feel everything I never thought I'd feel for that man, including some big emotions that I'm not quite sure what to do with yet. I don't know how to process them.

But I do know I'm going to hold onto them for dear life.

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BANE

WHEN I WAS A KID, there was a door at the end of the hall on the third floor of our house. A door that was always locked. I was told never to go near it. No creeping around. No snooping. No eavesdropping.

It wasn’t anything sinister or crazy, just Dad’s office. But even though I knew from a young age that I’d been born to one day lead an underworld empire, my parents wanted to keep me away from it for as long as possible.

They didn’t want me in that office because that office represented an end to innocence and childhood. It represented violence and darkness, death and anger.

It was forbidden. It was a door I wasn't to go near, and definitely not open.

I’ve been thinking about that fucking door a lot recently, and I don’t need a shrink to tell me why.

I married the door a few weeks ago, and blew it right off its hinges.

There are so many reasons I shouldn’t have gone near her—kept my distance.

Instead, I pulled her close. I trapped her. I *married her*, binding her to me, despite our dark history.

Both the way she shattered my heart when Lark died, and the way she barged back into my life, meeting me on that night that could have been my last.

We haven’t spoken about that night on the roof since. I don’t know, maybe she thinks I was up there as part of some master plan to force her to marry me.

I wasn’t.

I was on the edge that night for the same reason she was. Because every year, when the anniversary of Lark's death comes around, it gets harder and harder to pretend it’s in the past, or that I can keep on going.

There’s a black hole inside me that’s slowly sucking in all my light, life, and joy.

Plain and simple, I was on the maintenance deck roof of the Empire State Building that night because it’s a long way down and a real quick stop.

Ironically, ever since that night, I *have* been in free-fall.

Not a dramatic or suicidal one. One that involves falling into *her*, into something I can’t bring myself to name.

And what worries me now is the sudden stop.

Will she come to her senses? Remember more about our pasts and realize she should *run*, not walk, away from me? Or realize why I’ve still got a wall up between us, and still haven’t shared her bed?

I still haven’t told her that one truth that could destroy her.

The problem with falling for someone is that eventually, you have to touch the ground again.

And *I don’t fucking want to.*

I pace the length of my living room, the moody lighting casting deep shadows over my face. I glance out the window, then back at my phone, my brow knitting.

She went out *hours* ago, after using the Mercury's treadmill. Last I heard, she was getting food with Evelina and Brooklyn.

Nothing since.

I want to tell myself it's fine. I do feel a little bit of an asshole that I'm *not* worrying about a looming, shadowy threat trying to “get” her. But I’ve looked through the security footage from the night she was supposedly chased back to this building. I also paid someone to hack into the Metropolitan Transit Authority's system and steal a copy of the dash footage from D’Angelo’s bus. It wasn’t the *clearest* image, but…

Yeah.

I’m not so sure she was pushed, either. And there seriously isn't a *trace* of anyone chasing her through the Upper West Side the other week.

That's what's worrying me right now. Not that someone is trying to hurt her. That her own mind is fucking with her.

Making her see people and threats that don’t exist. Confusing and twisting her reality. She told me about seeing Dr. Turov, and mentioned dialing back her meds. It made me take a closer look at what she’s on. It’s a lot, and some seriously high doses, too.

I exhale, gritting my teeth.

I’m not fucking used to *worrying* about somebody like this.

Caring about them.

…honestly, a lot fucking more than just *caring*.

I want to say that this is something I “haven’t felt in a while”, since Lark. But the reality is, as much as losing her broke me, I can look back on our relationship now through clearer glasses, not the rose-tinted ones I wore back then.

I can look past the shiny veneer and see the rot that was there. The way we clashed. The way I changed who I was to be what I thought she needed. The way I told myself that feeling manipulated and fucked with was part of what love is.

I don’t think those things anymore. I know better.

So when I consider what I feel now for this woman I’ve brought into my life?

It scares the *shit* out of me.

My phone buzzes with a message from one of my men down in the lobby.

She's back.

I stop myself from going to meet her at the elevator like a fucking puppy dog. Instead, I stay where I am, by the living room windows, gazing out at the city.

The front door to the penthouse opens, and I hear the heavy thud of her chunky black combat boots.

"*Bane…*"

I imagined I'd get an apology for going AWOL, or her usual shrugged-off sass.

I'm not prepared for the broken, haunted sound of her voice cracking behind me. I turn, and my face caves when I see the shattered, scared look on her face.

"Come here, little bird," I murmur as I cross the distance between us and pull her into my arms. She chokes out a sob, clinging to the front of my shirt, burying herself against my chest.

"*Something is wrong with me*," she chokes, trembling against me. "*So fucking wrong.* I get thoughts I can't control," she whimpers. "Do things I don't understand. I blank out, and find myself somewhere else, and I don't have any idea how I got there. There are like…" She shakes her head, going silent.

"Tell me," I murmur.

"I—I can't."

I kiss the top of her head, my arms circling tighter around her.

"Yes, you can. You know you can."

Her grip on my shirt tightens.

"There are chunks of time I can't remember."

Fuck.

This is worse that I thought. And it both breaks my heart and makes me furious—because I want to fix her, but I don't know how.

I don't know if I *can*.

"I was with Evie and Brooklyn," she says, more quietly. "And then suddenly it was hours later, and I was at my dad's, in the carriage house." She scowls. "*Felicity* filled it with her fucking PetalGlow shit."

My phone buzzes in my pocket. I ignore it as I touch my fingers to her chin and lift her gaze to mine.

"Well, there you go. It makes perfect sense."

She frowns, and I grin.

"Of course you don't remember how you got there. You got contact-high as shit from all those fucking essential oils."

She chokes out a ragged giggle, smiling even as a tear trickles down her face. I wipe it away with a finger, ignoring my phone when it buzzes again in my pocket.

"Stop trying to cheer me up," she mumbles.

"No can do, little bird," I murmur as I kiss her forehead. "I married you, in case you forgot that, too, and cheering you up is part of the gig. So is reminding you that you aren't crazy."

That last part might be a lie. But if it is, it's one I'm okay telling her right now.

My mouth lowers to hers, and slowly, with a tenderness that has me completely out of my depth, I kiss her.

My goddamn phone buzzes *again*. I groan, pulling back from her.

"One sec."

I turn away as I yank out my phone. "*What*?" I snap.

“Boss.”

Sergey’s voice is so tight the hairs on the nape of my neck crinkle.

“Bane…”

I whirl to the choked voice behind me. Her face is pale, lit by the glow of her phone, and her eyes are wide as they stare in horror at the screen before pulling to mine.

“*Boss*,” Sergey grunts again into my ear.

“Yeah, I'm here—”

“There’s been an attack.”

I freeze. “*What*?”

"Someone hit the Marchetti place. The carriage house went up like a bomb. Felicity Marchetti is in hospital.”

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DOVE

THEY'RE SAYING it was a gas leak.

Right.

I wrap my arms around myself against the chill of the hospital's air-conditioning. A little way down the hall Bane is talking quietly in a small group: a guy called Sergey who works for him, Nikolai, two of my dad's top underbosses, and my father himself.

I don't trust myself to look in their direction. I worry they'll see the guilt written in neon all over my goddamn face, even though I don't know if I should be feeling it.

It wasn't me.

It couldn't have been.

A darker, more vicious, possibly more truthful voice snarls inside me.

Yes, it could.

I was *there*. I was at the carriage house less than two hours before it exploded.

Felicity's alive, at least. And awake, and doing okay. And as much as I hate that fucking dog, I'm relieved that Chanel is fine, too.

No one was killed.

I cringe as I say it over and over in my head, trying to assuage the guilt.

There's a small tap on my arm. Turning with a jump, I find myself face to face with Chiara.

“What are you doing here?”

She smirks. “Hey, literally *any* excuse to get hell out of New Jersey and away from being *Mrs. Ferrari*.” She shrugs. “Plus, I guess even wicked stepmothers deserve a minute of face time after they get blown halfway to Connecticut.”

I bite back the grin that almost peeks out. Not because I’m worried about being insensitive to Felicity’s accident.

…But because I’m l not sure if *I caused it*. If I did, that’s no accident.

It’s attempted murder.

“Dad said she’s going to be fine.” Chiara pouts. “Guess my birthday wish last year didn't come true.”

When I bite back another trying-not-to-look-guilty smile, Chiara sighs.

“*C’mon*.” She winks at me. “It’s funny. Not like she died or anything.” She giggles. “Heard her eyebrows are gone, though. Bonus!”

This time, I *do* grin. A little.

“So, how’s married life?”

I smile, and my face heats.

“*Well then*,” she giggles. “Guess that answers my next question if you two are fucking or not.”

I blush deeply, cringing. “*Chiara*!”

She rolls her eyes. “Dove, we’re adults. And I think sisters are mandated by law to talk about these things.”

I sigh. “It’s…complicated.”

“Well, *complicated* has a nice little flush to your cheeks and sway to your hips, in case no one's told you. And trust me, *complicated* is better than my situation.”

My face falls as I picture Gio Ferrari.

“Do you have to…?”

She makes a barf face. “Fuck him? Oh, Jesus, no. *No*.” Her nose wrinkles. “Can you imagine? How do you even have sex with Jabba the Hutt? I mean physically.”

I snort loudly, laughing at the gross visual.

“No, Gio would much rather pay professionals to screw him, which is fine with me.” She eyes me. “Trust me, Dove, you won the lottery with your situation.”

I smile privately. “I…don’t know about that. Well, maybe, I guess.”

“*Maybe*?!” She rolls her eyes. “Dove, please. A, he’s hot. B, he’s very hot.”

I laugh. “Okay, I get the picture.”

“And C?” She nods past me. I turn and flush when I realize Bane is staring right at me.

I’ve caught him doing that a lot since that night on the roof of the Empire State Building. Except most of the time, there’s been dark, malevolent flames flickering under the surface.

Like he’s convincing himself not to bury me alive *quite* yet.

This time, the look on his face and burning in his eyes is entirely different.

It’s…warm. Still fierce and deadly, with that same almost eerie, unblinking focus. But it doesn't bring a shiver down my spine this time. No twinge of fear.

The way he’s looking at me right now is just pure *possession*.

“Dove.”

I blink, somehow pulling my eyes away from Bane and back to my half-sister. She lifts a brow, smiling quietly and shaking her head.

“C, I promise you, Gio doesn’t look at me like that. I don’t think *any* guy has.”

Part of me wants to burst her bubble and tell her that he’s looking at me like that because he’s wondering the same thing I am.

If I did this.

If I'm guilty.

If I'm a killer.

Because if I’m capable of this—*did* I kill Lorenzo, too? Did I somehow get free and overpower him? Was I the one that cut his throat before Antonio and my father’s men riddled his body with bullets?

Chiara coughs delicately, and I feel a presence behind me. When I turn, my pulse jumps as I look up into Bane’s dark, all-consuming eyes.

They linger on me a moment, his gaze piercing right into me.

Not with accusation. It’s not a “what the fuck did you do” look.

It’s like he’s staring into my soul to make sure I’m okay. To let me know that he’s here for me and not going anywhere.

I’ve never felt that before.

Ever.

He looks past me toward my sister.

“Chiara,” he nods.

“Bane,” she smiles back.

“I was hoping to have a word with my wife.”

It’s truly scary how much I like the sound of that from his mouth.

“Yeah…” Chiara’s eyes flit to mine, her brow raising to checking if that’s okay. I give a subtle nod back, and her lips curl up before she looks at Bane. “Yeah, of course.” She reaches over and squeezes my hand. “Hey… Call me sometime, okay? I feel like we…” She glances at Bane quickly before her eyes slide back to me. “Just call me.”

I suddenly hug her, which I don’t think we’ve done in *years*.

“Count on it,” I say quietly.

I watch her walk over to our dad before I look up at Bane.

“We’re getting out of here for a while,” he says quietly.

I nod. “Fine by me. I hate hospitals—”

“I don’t mean the hospital.”

He takes my hands in his and looks down into my eyes.

“I’m taking you away from New York.”

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BANE

SHE NEEDED THIS.

I glance over at her, grinning when I see her staring wide-eyed at the cliffs dropping dramatically down from the side of the road to the French Riviera.

New York was already turning into a *madhouse* of media frenzy, and I knew I had to get her away from it: the reporters, the online chatter, the rumor mill already pegging her for that motherfucker Lorenzo's death.

…Although if she *did* kill that monster, she should be getting a fucking hero's parade for it.

But now, in the wake of the gas explosion at the Marchetti house, the constant background noise concerning all things Marchetti has hit a crescendo.

So I've removed her from it. If I didn't, there's no doubt in my mind that even someone as armored and walled off as her would collapse.

Or explode.

I spent most of the private flight over to Nice on the phone: calling in favors, greasing palms, generally making it okay that I'm taking someone considered a person of interest in a re-opened murder investigation out of the country.

I don't give a shit about that myself, but the whole point is to bring her a measure of peace right now. I don't need French police breaking down our

door trying to extradite her back to New York.

From Nice, it was a short train ride to Èze-sur-Mer, where we picked up the vintage Porsche 912—big thanks to Sergey for arranging that. And that's what we're in as we wind up the stunning cliffside roads to the village of Èze itself, high above the Mediterranean.

I haven't told her specifically where we're going. But I get the impression that she truly doesn't give a shit, as long as it's away from the noise back home.

This is definitely away from the noise.

It's away from everything.

"Holy *shit*…"

I grin as I pull the car into the small walled compound perched on the edge of the cliffs over the sea below. She stares at the sprawling, ivy-covered stone villa as I shut the engine off.

My parents bought this place before I was born, thinking it would be a family getaway spot. But after Mom died when I was five, Dad and I never came back.

I think for him, there are too many specific memories of her wrapped up in this place. But I don't really remember my mother that much. For me, the place is a way to remind myself of my mother's *existence*, not sad memories. So as an adult, I've started coming here by myself from time to time, as an escape from the world when I need it.

This place is *beautiful*—an almost castle-like villa sitting high above the white sand and azure-blue water. But I'm not looking at it, or the view.

I'm looking at *her*.

I'm looking at the way the anxiety melts from her face as she drinks it all in. The way I can almost literally see the weight lifting from her shoulders.

All that shit in New York will be waiting there when we get back, of course. But for however long I can keep her here, it's just us two.

No noise. No drama. No press shoving microphones in her face after rehearsal. No accusations of murder.

We both need that.

“Bane?”

I blink, realizing I’ve been fucking staring at her as she stands in the open double doorway leading from the living room to the terrace beyond.

She lifts a brow. “Our *luggage*…?”

It’s not the first time she’s brought up getting on a plane without any luggage. That concern was immediately followed by one about traveling out of the country with all her pending legal shit.

I told her not to worry about either one. When she kept pushing it, I finally told her to bend over my lap.

Which she did, *quite* eagerly.

Just as eagerly as she took every spank on her ass, her skirt pulled up and her panties pulled down, in fact.

I arranged on the flight to have clothes and anything else we might need sent here. But in the meantime…

“What are we doing for cloth—”

Her voice falters and her eyes widen as I peel off my shirt and toss it aside. My pants are next, then my boxers, before I calmly walk toward her, completely nude.

Fully erect.

I slip my fingers under the waist of her skirt and push it and her panties down off her hips and ass, letting them fall to her feet.

“Any other questions,” I murmur into her lips, wrapping my arms around her.

She shakes her head, and my mouth descends to devour hers.

There’s still so many secrets. The sharp, lingering twinge of dishonesty, piercing my soul as I peel the rest of her clothes off and kiss her until those lips bruise. So many questions.

But right now, none of those matter.

The only thing that matters is her.

Us.

This.

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DOVE

A FEW MONTHS AGO, when I was looking for an escape, I went to the eighty-third floor of the Empire State Building.

But over the last couple of months, I've realized that what I was looking for up there wasn't an escape, but an *exit*.

A permanent one.

That need to close my eyes, spread my arms and just *fall* isn't there anymore. It's not lurking in the dark corners of my thoughts or dogging my every step like a shadow I can't shake.

In a twist of *supreme* irony, I'm pretty sure it's the dark, broody storm cloud of a man I married who's chased those other storm clouds away. Who has cleared the shadows and pulled me—at times quite forcefully—back from that edge.

The same man who knew without asking that I *needed* this.

To get away from life in general.

It's been four nights since we got to Èze. That first night, without luggage of any kind, all we had was the clothes on our backs and my meds, which he'd remembered to bring.

Obviously, the clothes came *off* our backs fairly quickly.

Bane had a couple of suitcases of things overnighted to the gorgeous stone villa above the Mediterranean. But we've barely opened them.

I mean…why would we? Who needs clothes when all they're going to do is get between a firm hand and an eager backside? Also, Bane's destroyed enough pairs of my panties. I don't need to have new ones shipped to France just so he can add to the trail of destruction.

I'm not naive. I'm aware that this is a temporary escape, not a permanent one. Eventually, I'm going have to face the music, and try to find answers to the questions I'm still not sure how to ask, never mind answer.

What really happened that night?

Why is my DNA all over the handle of the knife that was used to slice open the throat of my best friend's killer?

And there's an even bigger, louder, more pressing question: *why am I okay with falling in love with the man SHE loved?*

What the *fuck* does that say about me?

* * *

THE AIR GROWS a little cooler at night. But I'm still more than comfortable in the bikini I've been wearing all afternoon, sunning myself on the veranda that looks down on the cliffs below.

I've been trying not to think about it. I've been trying to put it on the list of "things you don't need to worry about here", along with the charges against me, the confusion in my head, and the lurking, lingering fear that I might be *far* more fucked up than I think.

But honestly, I wish I had her diary here. I'd been trying to pace myself with it—not because I didn't want to devour the whole thing in one sitting, but because each entry revealed another candid snapshot of my friend. Another side. Some of them were familiar, and others weren't.

And I've needed space to absorb it all.

To remember.

To try and give myself a little grace, and to atone for falling for *her* love.

But with no diary to read, I'm tracing a fingertip over the leather-bound books in the library, a silk sarong wrapped around my waist, when I hear the floor creak behind me.

"*There* you are."

A smile creeps over my face as I turn, gasping as Bane surges into me. I moan softly against his mouth when he kisses me, his hands skimming around my waist and pressing me to the bookshelves at my back.

My breath catches when I feel the thick throb of his erection against my center through his shorts and my sarong and bikini. As I inhale the scent of him—woodsmoke and leather, mixed with a clean almost citrusy smell that turns me to putty in his hands.

I open my mouth for his tongue, mine dancing with his as my leg lifts to his hip, my arms winding around the back of his neck as I roll my hips against him.

"*Hang on,*" he growls.

I shake my head, holding him tighter. "I don't want to hang—"

"I need to show you something first."

He pulls away and takes my hand in his. He leads me out of the library, into the living room, and then out to the stone veranda high above the ocean below.

"*Bane!*"

My heart jumps into my throat as he casually steps up onto the stone parapet at the very edge of the veranda, which *immediately* drops away on the other side. Bane's face is calm as he turns to offer me a hand.

"Come here."

I pause, then take his hand, letting him pull me up next to him. A terrifying and yet familiar and comforting feeling sizzles through my veins as I glance

down at the dark abyss below, at the bottom of the rocky, jagged cliffs.

The air suddenly feels colder, and a violent shiver tightens my muscles as my spine snaps straight.

My toes curl against the stone. My breathing slows and turns shallow.

I feel numb, and it all feels like it's hitting my senses through a wall of gauze as I slowly lower my gaze to the plunging abyss dropping away inches from the edges of my toes.

Everything is quiet and still.

All I can hear is the sluggish, heavy thud of my heart echoing inside my head.

"*Bane—*"

"Do you still want to?"

There's a flat, distant edge to his voice, devoid of any emotion. Like he's removed any trace of the pain that comes with asking that question.

Do I still want to jump.

Do I still want to *die*.

The world around me slows to a crawl. I can hear the wind swirling around my ankles and teasing over my skin. I can feel the weight of every thought that grins lasciviously at me from the shadows. Taunting. Prodding. *Daring*.

Do I want to die.

I draw in a shaky breath, staring into the jagged rocky blackness far below.

"Why…"

"Just answer the question," he whispers.

I turn, expecting to find his eyes on me. Instead, I tremble a little more when I see he's looking down into the darkness too, like he's waging the same battle.

Like he’s got the same demons taunting and daring him to just take one last step and be done with it.

“If you go…” Bane murmurs. His gaze is still down, staring into the blackness, as he nods his chin up and down. Then he turns his head, his dark eyes glinting in the moonlight as he looks at me. “Then I go.”

I drag in a broken breath. “Why would I go?” I whisper.

“I don’t know.” He shakes his head, looks back down past our toes again. “But if you go, I’m coming with you.”

A shiver ripples up my back as his hand finds mine. Our fingers entwine, and I squeeze tightly as a vicious tremor wracks my body and I stare back at the drop.

The whole world shrinks to the head of a pin.

To two heartbeats.

To the feel of his fingers laced with mine.

And then slowly, the breath I’ve been holding in for longer than I can remember releases, taking with it all the pain, shame, self-betrayal and self-destructiveness.

The desire for *any* of this life to end.

I shudder as my fingers clench his tight.

“I don’t think I want to anymore,” I whisper, my voice breaking as a tear rolls down my face. A laugh chokes through the tears.

“*I’m too fucking happy.*”

Without a word, he’s yanking me to him and crushing my mouth with his.

“*I had to know*,” he groans, his voice rough. He kisses me so hard that I see stars and have to choke back a whimper.

His eyes are still locked with mine as he pulls away.

“…because I love you.”

Bane scoops me against him, lifting me off my feet as I gasp into his lips, knowing only the feeling of kissing him and losing myself in that kiss. He steps down from the edge of the parapet and onto the veranda, then we're crashing onto one of the chaise lounges.

I moan as he flips us, pushing me down onto my back and kissing me fiercely as he pulls away my sarong and bikini. His mouth slides down my neck, over my collarbone, nipping and sucking down the slope of my breasts until he finds an aching, pebbled nipple.

I cry out as he bites down, his teeth sending both pleasure and pain ricochetting through my core. His hand pushes between my thighs, forcing them apart before he cups my throbbing pussy.

"*Fuck*!"

I moan loudly when he swirls his tongue around my nipple and sinks two fingers into my slickness, teasing against my g-spot as I writhe and shudder.

His mouth trails down my body, licking over my stomach as it caves beneath his tongue. He keeps his fingers deep inside me, scissoring them, stroking in and out before he shoves my legs apart and lowers his mouth between them.

Oh shit…

A broken, needy sound tumbles from my lips when Bane's tongue swirls over my clit. He sucks on it, dancing the tip of his tongue over the swollen nub as I arch my back, screaming in pleasure. My fingers tangle in his hair, my face scrunched up in sweet agony as he devours my pussy.

His fingers saw in and out, stroking against that one spot over and over, until my legs are shaking and my stomach is clenched so tight it almost hurts.

My head lolls back, my mouth open, my eyes shut, my hands gripping his hair as Bane *devours* my fucking pussy.

I come so quickly it takes my breath away. The orgasm explodes through my core, spreading through my veins until I can feel it in the tips of my fingers and toes. Down my spine. In my bones. In my fucking *teeth*.

I barely have a chance to catch my breath before Bane rolls me over. He shoves my legs apart, making me cry out as he slaps my ass hard over and over until I’m sobbing in pleasure and pain and never wanting it to stop.

I shudder, moaning as Bane’s knees move to either side of my hips, keeping me prone on the lounger. His hot, swollen cock sinks between my thighs from behind and the head pushes against my slick opening. His hand wraps my hair in a fist, tugging my head back *just* as he thrusts into me.

Hard.

Rough.

Deep.

I let out a wrenched sob of pleasure as his palm cracks down on my bruised ass again. He draws out, then rams right back in as he tugs my head back again, dragging his teeth over my neck and the shell of my ear.

“You don’t *get* to fucking jump,” he chokes into my ear as his muscled hips crash into me. “Not now, not fucking ever.”

My eyes roll back as his gorgeous, delicious cock rams deeply into me, every thick, swollen inch stretching me to my limit in a way that has my skin on fire and my toes curling.

He smacks my ass and tits, pinching my nipples and then spanking me again as he fucks the *shit* out of me.

Even after what we just shared on the ledge, he knows *this* is what I need. It’s not that I want this *over* “making love". It’s that to me—to him, to *us*—this *is* making love.

A violent, chaotic, brutal love that hurts so good that it tattoos itself across your soul.

A love to shatter the darkness that can’t be stopped by whatever came before.

A love that doesn’t run from the past, but knows the past is how we got here.

“I fucking love you, baby,” he groans into my ear as he bites down on my lobe. His fist yanks on my hair, making me scream in delicious, twisted pleasure. “I love you, and if you ever do jump, you better fucking know that I’ll be right behind you, raising hell and burning down heaven to drag you back to me.”

This is the love I’ve always wanted. A love that’ll follow you over the edge to drag you back to safety.

A perfectly beautiful, mad, bloody, messy fucking love.

Bane’s fist twists my head around. He crushes his mouth to mine, devouring my lips and thrusting his tongue past them as I scream into them. My hips roll, ecstasy snaking through my core as I thrust my ass up to meet his punishing thrusts, until sweet black oblivion drowns me.

When I come, it’s a shattering, consuming, otherworldly release. I cry out into his lips, twisting and writhing and shaking so hard my vision goes dark. Bane groans, pounding deep and rough and hard until all at once he’s there with me.

He explodes into my pussy as my second orgasm thunders through me, his hot cum pumping deep as he feasts on my lips. He keeps thrusting in and out, coating my thighs with both of us until we collapse into a panting, exhausted pile.

I’m vaguely aware of him picking me up and carrying me inside. Then I’m kissing him softly as the warm shower rains down over us. Lifting my knee to his hips. Whimpering as he picks me up, slides me onto his thick cock, and fucks me again slowly against the glass of the shower, his lips never leaving mine.

Later, he carries me naked into the bedroom I’ve been sleeping in every night and tucks me into bed. My sluggish mind is already forming the word “goodnight” when he slides in next to me and pulls the covers over both of us.

Wait.

What?

We've fucked almost every way two humans can. But we've never done *this*.

…We've never actually *slept* together.

"*Bane—*"

"I'm tired," he growls quietly, rolling me onto my side and pulling me so I'm snuggled against his muscled body, his still mostly hard cock pressed to my ass and his arms circling me. "I'm tired of telling myself that I can't go there with you. That I don't deserve to," he murmurs against my hair. "But mostly, little bird," he exhales, "I'm just tired of *not doing it*."

I twist my head, looking at him over my shoulder.

"I'm tired of that, too."

"Damn," he grunts with a lazy grin. "I was almost hoping you'd fight me on that so I could just keep you pinned in my arms all night."

I giggle. "You can do that anyway."

His arms tighten around me, pulling my back against his strong chest.

"Way ahead of you, little bird," he murmurs. "*Way* ahead of you."

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33

DOVE

"*Merci*!"

I smile at the post office worker after signing for the package.

"*Je vous en prie*," she replies, pushing the big brown box across the counter.

Outside, I lug the package from Chiara to the '72 Porsche and plop it down in the passenger seat. I keep the windows down, grinning as I feel the Mediterranean breeze in my hair and teasing over my sun-kissed skin as I drive up the winding cliff roads from town to the villa.

It's been two weeks, and we're pushing the limit in terms of staying here.

Madame Kuzmina has been *very* understanding about my leave of absence in light of all the bullshit…which is weird, and slightly worryingly out of character. But I've learned not to ask questions when it comes to her.

No, the past two weeks have been heaven, but we're going to have to go back to the real world soon.

I make a face as I pull the vintage car to a stop outside the villa.

Best not to think about that now.

The sun is setting. Bane's outside on the veranda, dozing in one of the chaise lounges, a copy of Bastian Pierce's *Fucked Sideways* lying open on his bare chest. I've played a *huge* part in him not sleeping much the last two

weeks, so I let him keep snoozing as I eagerly set the box from my sister down on the coffee table.

Chiara emailed me the other day, saying she'd found a box of Agatha's things in the closet of her old room at Dad's house, and would I like her to send it?

Why, yes, I fucking would.

I tear the tape off the top and rip the box open, grinning as I lean over it and poke around inside.

Aww.

Right on top is a framed photo of Agatha hugging Lark and me at around the age of nine, in the back garden of the house. A smile touches my lips, my eyes misting as I set it down on the coffee table and poke around some more.

Agatha's old pocketbook.

The little metal case with the matching pens inside that she used to write her letters with. She was a *prolific* letter-writer, and I was always jealous of her incredible penmanship.

There's also a scarf, and when I yank it out and bring it to my face, I melt a little, smelling the faint vestiges of her perfume.

I remind myself to thank Chiara profusely and get her an *awesome* Christmas present.

The rest of the contents are just a few old paperback mysteries, a pair of reading glasses, and…

My brows arch.

An ancient VHS videotape.

I pull it out, reading the title on the side: "My girls" in Agatha's impeccable pre-dementia handwriting.

Curiosity burns in me. I glance out to the veranda. Bane's still asleep, and I'm not going to wake him up to ask if this house has an old VHS player.

So I just open the media cabinet set into the bookshelves of the living room. DVD player, CD player, tape deck….

Bingo.

I grin from ear to ear when I spot the old VHS player. My hands shake as I push the tape inside. It takes me a while to figure out how to get it to play on the TV, but eventually, I succeed.

The TV screen flickers to life as the tape begins to play. A *huge* grin tugs my lips as Agatha's face fills the screen.

And I mean *fills*.

The video is zoomed super close to her face. There's no sound, but she's laughing and smiling broadly as the camera jiggles, like the person recording her is laughing, too.

Then I realize the damn TV is muted.

I scramble for the remote and hit the volume button. Instantly, Agatha's laughter fills my ears for the first time in *years*.

"No, it's recording, hon!" she laughs, the skin around her twinkling eyes crinkling with smile and age lines. "The little red light is on!"

"Oh, *shit*, it's zoomed all the way in!"

The second voice stops me cold.

I've only heard it in recordings and videos from before I was born.

Because the owner of that slightly husky yet gorgeously feminine voice died giving birth to me.

It's *my mom*.

"Be careful of her head!" Mom laughs, her voice still happy, though tired.

Agatha's zoomed-in face snickers. "Which one?! Don't you scold me," she laughs. "I've held babies before, you know, thank you very much!"

Wait.

What?

Agatha's brows knit. "You're still recording, hon."

"*Fuck.*"

Agatha laughs. "Watch that potty mouth in front of them!"

I stare at the screen, hungry for answers.

"Oh! Found the zoom button."

"Good," Agatha smiles. "Now, get a good shot of me and my grand babies." She shoots the camera a look. "And you'd better believe that's what I'm calling them."

"Well," Mom laughs sweetly, "you're the closest thing to a mother I have, so I think that's fair."

An old-sounding cellphone rings in the background.

"Oh, shit! That might be him," Mom blurts, still out of frame. She puts the camera down, and I laugh when it tilts wildly, angling away from Agatha.

"Is it him?" Agatha asks anxiously. "Does he have the passports?!"

My pulse skips.

"*Dammit*, no," Mom sighs. "Just the dry cleaners. Cesare's shirts are ready."

Agatha snorts in disgust. "He'll be picking up his own damn shirts soon enough. Or going shirtless for all I care."

"Ahem. What happened to not swearing in front of them?"

The camera goes right side up again, zooms out, and swings back to Agatha.

What the fuck.

Two tiny infants are swaddled in matching pink and white blankets with little pink caps on their heads, each of them tucked under one of Agatha's arms as she sits in a rocking chair.

A rustic cabin window behind her looks out over waves crashing against a sandy, rocky, wintery beach.

Agatha beams down at the two sleeping little ones with a happy sigh. “He might be a bastard,” she sighs. “But you two made some beautiful babies.”

My heart stops.

“Don’t worry, my little birds,” she coos. “You won’t have to think about that horrible man ever again once we leave.”

One of the babies stirs, her tiny face scrunching up as a soft, delicate little cry bubbles from her mouth.

“*Awww*, I hear you, little Dove.”

A sob catches in my throat as my hand flies to my mouth, my eyes filling with tears. I watch as the shot stabilizes, the camera clicked into place on what must be a tripod. A woman in baggy sweats and an oversized hoodie steps into view.

“Lydia!” Agatha scolds. “Stop it! You should be in bed.”

“Please,” Mom scoffs. “I’m fine.”

“You just gave birth to twins. Quit being so stubborn.”

Twins.

Tears roll down my cheeks, my face caving as I press a hand to the TV screen.

“Come here, little Dove,” Mom whispers, taking the crying baby…*me*… from Agatha. “You’re just hungry, aren’t you?”

She steps slightly away from the camera, unzipping her hoodie and bringing me to her breast. For a second she turns, and I see her smiling, tired face.

Another small cry burbles through the speakers, and Mom laughs. “Oh boy, now *you’re* hungry too, aren’t you, Lark?”

“Hang on, hon,” Agatha says, gently standing from the rocker holding Lark.

My best friend.

My other half.

…*My fucking twin sister*.

“Let’s shut this off for now.”

Agatha steps over to the camera, and the screen goes black. Then it switches to dull, silent blacks and white static.

Something in me breaks.

Something shatters.

The cry that erupts from my throat is somewhere between mourning and happiness.

That place between pain and release.

I crumple, sobbing as I drop my face to my hand, the other still pressed to the static screen. Feeling like my reality just broke. Like the floor is giving out beneath me with a creak.

Except then it creaks again, audibly.

My eyes are blurry, my face wet with snot and tears as I turn to look up to where Bane is standing in the doorway of the living room behind me, his face haggard and drawn.

“*Baby*…”

I somehow tumble to my feet and rush into him, slamming into him with a gut-wrenching, twisted sob from deep in my chest. I collapse into his arms, sobbing and weeping in pain and relief, in grief and in joy.

And my whole world is upside down.

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34

BANE

I CAN HOLD HER, give her something solid to cling to and tell her I love her.

But loving someone doesn't necessarily mean you know how to fix them.

Make them whole.

Take away their pain.

…Or explain that you've known this secret the whole time.

She doesn't even know the full story yet.

But for now, I give her everything I can. I wrap my arms around her. I tell her how much I love her. That I'm here for her.

And wordlessly, I try to tell her how sorry I am for not telling her the truth.

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35

DOVE

It's hard to name the emotions that flicker like fireflies under my skin as I stand at my sister's grave with the man she loved.

Who's now my husband.

Who *I'm* madly in love with.

It's impossible to know what to think or say, which is probably why Bane and I are utterly silent right now.

It's mostly a ceremonial resting place. After Lorenzo's meth-house went up like a bomb, right after Antonio and the others dragged me out, there wasn't much left in the way of remains to be buried.

But I've still come to this place many times over the years.

To say hi and tell her the random shit going on in my life.

To cry.

To mourn my friend.

…My *twin*.

There's so much to wonder about that I don't know where to begin. Why I was told that Lark was Agatha's granddaughter, and that my mother died during childbirth, when I now have video evidence that was untrue.

Worse, why Agatha never said a thing. Fury brews inside me when I think of *all those fucking years* she looked me in the eye with that sweet smile and lied to my face about everything.

Did my dad know?

Did *Lark*?

Where is that cabin on the beach, and why were Mom and Agatha there with Lark and me as newborns? Where was my father? And who was the man they were waiting for a call from, something to do with passports?

I haven't told anyone any of this, not even Chiara, which I feel shitty about.

Because if this is true, that makes Lark *her* half-sister, too.

But I can't talk to her about it yet. Not until I have answers to at least some of the million questions in my head.

I take a slow, shaky breath. I reach my arm out and curl my fingers into Bane's. When I sense a flicker of hesitation, I tense. The lump in my throat grows as I turn to look up at him.

"Is this…weird?" I say quietly, wincing and pulling my hand away.

I'm suddenly acutely aware that as strange and maybe a little uncomfortable as it is for me to be standing here with him at the grave of the girl who was going to marry him first, it's possibly even *more* uncomfortable for him. I personally feel like a home-wrecking cunt. But *he* must feel…

God, I can't even imagine.

My face twists. "I'm sorry, maybe we shouldn't have come…" My gaze drops to the grass before I look back to him. "Seriously… Is this weird for you?"

Bane's face is stoic. But then the corners of his lips curl up as his head swivels, his eyes dragging to mine. Slowly, he smiles and shakes his head.

"No." His mouth twists. "Well, less weird than you'd think," he says quietly.

"I feel awful right now," I mumble, turning to look at Lark's gravestone.

“Don’t.”

My pulse skips as he takes my hand and squeezes it firmly.

“People enter our lives, and sometimes they leave them sooner than we'd like.” He turns toward me, his eyes locked with mine. “But the world keeps turning. We keep breathing. We keep choosing to live, every day.”

I look back to Lark’s resting place, smiling weakly.

“Is this wrong?” I say quietly. “Would she hate us for this?”

I think I'm asking her as much as him.

He shakes his head from side to side. “I think she’d be proud of the woman you’ve become,” he murmurs. “Of all the challenges you've overcome to be here still; breathing, standing on a world that keeps turning.” He smiles. “Keeping her in your heart.”

We turn back to the gravestone, and stand there in silence for another minute, until he squeezes my hand again.

“I’m going to give you a minute alone with her,” he says gently.

“I—you don’t have to…” I squeeze my eyes shut. “I know you…”

My heart twists around itself.

“I know you loved her…”

Bane stretches his large hand out to cup my cheek. When I open my eyes, I see him standing right in front of me, looking deep into my soul.

“Yes, I loved her,” he says quietly. “*And* I love you.” He shakes his head slowly. “That’s not an either/or statement, baby.”

My brows knit. “I’m not *jealous* that you loved her,” I blurt. “I just—”

Fuck.

No.

That’s a big, fat lie.

I *am* jealous. It’s just that I fucking hate myself for it.

“You’re allowed to feel whatever you feel, little bird,” he murmurs. “And you’re allowed to feel it without beating yourself up about it.”

He leans down and kisses me softly.

“If I say something, do you promise to take it at face value without looking for a deeper meaning, or wondering if I mean something else by it?”

I smile wryly. “I’ll try.”

Bane leans down to touch his forehead to mine.

“I’m confident that she’d be more than okay with this,” he murmurs. “With you and me. I need you to believe me on that.”

My eyes close as I drop my forehead to his chest.

“*Thank you*,” I whisper.

Bane lifts my chin up with a finger before he leans in to kiss me.

“Take as much time as you need,” he murmurs. “I’ll be in the car.”

I watch him walk away, then turn to give my sister my full attention. I lift the bouquet of roses in my hand and smile awkwardly at her resting place before I kneel and place them against the headstone.

“Well, *fuck*,” I sigh. “This turned into a whole soap opera, didn’t it?”

I put my hand out and rest my palm on the smooth marble with the carved lettering.

Lark Imogen Peltier.

“*I’m sorry*,” I choke quietly, my brow furrowing. “I’m sorry for taking him.”

My eyes close, and a single tear trickles down my cheek as I lean close and kiss the top of her stone.

“But thank you,” I add, smiling as happy tears start to fall. “Thank you for him.”

Between grief and joy, pain and relief.

That’s where I meet my sister’s spirit.

With a tear and a smile, and love in my heart.

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36

DOVE

It's hard to go back to normal after your sense of "normal" is shredded into a million pieces and sent scattering to the four winds.

There are still so many fucking questions. So much pain and confusion.

But Bane is right: the world keeps turning. We keep breathing. We choose to live over the opposite, day after day, until it's not a conscious choice you have to make anymore.

You just get up, try your best, and keep on living.

So that's what I do.

It's not like I've got nothing on my plate. There's the ongoing investigation, which is terrifying. But I've got the best lawyers in New York—arguably some of the best on the planet—in my corner. That's comforting.

Taylor Crown is a *boss*. She's tough, super smart, and not fucking around one bit when it comes to my case. Fumi Yamaguchi, AKA the First Lady of New York, prides herself on having "pro-level cunt energy" against opposition counsel.

I like them. A lot.

There's also ballet, and the additional hours I'm putting in to be ready for the gala showcase, especially after I missed two freaking weeks in the studio. *God*, I was sore the next morning after my first day back.

And then there’s my mental state. The waking up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat, trying to make myself remember details that I simply can’t.

Did I have anything to do with the carriage house explosion that could have killed Felicity? Did I slit Lorenzo Cielo's throat?

It helps that when I do wake up to those nightmare thoughts, it’s in Bane’s arms. I have no idea what I’d do if I didn’t have him to hold onto in all of this.

Dr. Turov has been a *huge* help, too. I’m seeing her three times a week, and we’re slowly ramping back my meds.

I don’t know if it’s a placebo effect or not, but it truly does feel like it’s helping. I have a clearer sense of real versus imagined, almost like someone’s finally cleaned my eyeglasses properly so I see the world with clarity.

That clarity is…jarring, though. It’s unsettling when I look at events in hindsight through a less medicated lens, especially when I talk through those events with Dr. Turov.

It’s a tough pill to swallow, the idea that the attacks you’ve barely escaped from over the last few months *might not be real*.

Dr. Turov have talked about both those incidents. The second one, where I was sure I was being chased, was probably a so-called “persecutory delusion”.

It's relatively harmless compared to the first incident involving the bus.

That one’s a bit more serious.

Dr. Turov says that could be a cross between suppressed suicidal ideation and “dissociative self-harm displacement”.

In layman’s terms, I’m insane, harbor a desire to kill myself, and imagined a scenario where an unseen force pushed me into oncoming traffic.

But the scarier reality could be that I threw *myself* in front of that bus and then sold myself a story invented by my subconscious in order to cover its own tracks.

…*Yeah*.

It's either that, or someone really *did* try to push me in front of a bus. Except there’s no security footage showing that, nor did the bus driver see anything except me suddenly hurtling forward in front of his vehicle.

Again, this is where I truly don’t know what I’d do without Bane. Because not only is he there for me—holding me when the nightmares come, calming me when I start spiraling—he also doesn’t patronize me about any of it.

He’s just *there*, in every way I need.

Thank you, Lark.

Thank you for leading me to him.

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37

DOVE

Dear Boo,

I feel that I'm losing him. Or that I'm going to. And when I do, it'll be my fault, and mine alone.

I don't know how to stop this…THING inside me that keeps popping out and making me do things I don't want to.

I lie to him. I tell him I'll meet him somewhere and then don't, without calling or anything. I say mean things…cruel, awful stuff.

Even though he should, he doesn't tell me to fuck off. He doesn't dump me for someone who won't act like a total psycho cunt to him all the time.

I hate this, and hate that I don't know how to stop it, or why it happens. I hate that I snap out of it later and just want to cry or throw myself off a fucking bridge.

I'm legit going crazy, Boo.

There's a monster inside me, and it's getting harder to keep it caged up.

It's getting harder to tell what's real and what's all in my head.

Please help me.

A LUMP FORMS in my throat as I read the entry a second, then a third time.

Jesus.

I'm nearing the end of Lark's diary, and they're all like this at this point. Painful to read, full of confusion and doubt and self-loathing as she becomes unsure what's real or what's not.

I was terrified before to see her mental state devolve into, well, *mine*. But at least now, as horrible as it is to read about her spiraling as she unwittingly got closer to her death, I know *why* her story feels so familiar.

It's not a bizarre coincidence that Lark's mental state mirrors my own.

It's *genetics*.

I exhale slowly as I blink away a tear for the twin I lost.

I've forced myself to read these final entries one at a time, because they're often just too heavy to read back to back. But I'm so close to the end, and I *have* to know how she was just before her death.

I also need to know if she ever *knew*. If Agatha told her the truth about who she was, or if she died not knowing.

That's why I turn the page with shaking hands to read the next entry. But when I do, my brows knit.

"What the hell?" I blurt out.

Bane, sitting on the other end of the couch with my feet in his lap, looks up from his phone. "What?"

I frown at the book, flipping forward. There's a bunch of ripped, frayed edges between the passage I just read and the blank pages at the back.

"There are pages missing."

Bane frowns, but he doesn't say anything.

“Lark’s diary,” I add, holding it up in case he didn’t realize what I was reading. I no longer have the fake cover on it. “Some of the pages are gone. It looks like they’ve been torn out.”

His brow furrows. “By her?”

“Maybe. But *why*?”

Bane shrugs. “Baby, I don’t know. I also feel like maybe you’ve gone as far as you should, given that it’s a *diary*.”

“You’re saying I’m snooping?”

He lifts a brow. “Is that up for debate?”

Fair.

But the thing is, if Lark was going to tear pages out because of bad stuff she wrote, I mean…there’s *a lot* of other shit she’d have torn out, too.

I don’t mention that to Bane, though. Not that I want to keep secrets from him, but I don’t think I need to tell him how I’ve read all the truly terrible stuff Lark put him through, especially toward the end.

“I’m going to go to my dad’s and look for them. Maybe they fell out.”

Bane shoots me a look. “We're talking over seven years ago,” he says.

“There was plenty of other stuff still in Lark and Agatha’s rooms after so long. Maybe—”

“I really think you should drop—”

“She was my *sister*!” I snap before I can stop myself. Immediately, I wince, my brows pinching. “I’m…I’m sorry. The comedown from some of the meds…”

He nods, rubbing my foot with his hand. “No apology necessary. I get it.” He exhales. “Still, I really do think you should drop it.”

“I get why you might not want me to,” I say gently. “But…I need to do this, and I need you to understand why. I just…” I shrug. “I need to *know*, Bane. If she knew about me, about our mom.”

He looks away.

“Look, you stay here. I’ll go—”

“No.” He nods decisively as he looks back at me. “We’ll go together.”

* * *

MELINDA IS WORKING UPSTAIRS. But it *is* my dad’s house, and it’s not like the downstairs apartment is locked. I also rationalize that I won’t be poking around in Melinda’s room, just the rest of the place, which is fair game.

Sort of. Kind of. Right?

I further rationalize it with the same argument I gave Bane: this was my fucking *sister*. I have a right to know if she knew about me, and to follow any and all threads that might lead me to the answer.

There’s nothing in Agatha’s old room, not in any of the boxes still there, or in the closet, or the ensuite bathroom.

Lark’s room is the same. Not a thing. I even check behind the framed Van Gogh print that’s still on the wall, just in case.

Nope.

Not in her closet, under the bathroom vanity, or behind the toilet or radiator. The kitchen cabinets and drawers are empty, and there's nothing behind the refrigerator. I comb through every nook and cranny of the living room, the hallway, the broom closet and the dining room. I untape every box and shake out every book.

Bane exhales as he leans against the wall of Lark’s mostly empty old room, save for an empty bookcase and her old, bare desk. “I think it’s time to admit defeat.”

I nod, but then think of the one place I haven't checked.

“I’ll be right back.”

“*Stop*,” he growls as I make a beeline for Melinda’s room. “No,” he hisses, grabbing my arm. “We’re fucking *done* here. We’re not breaking and entering—”

“I’m not *breaking* or even entering!” I blurt. “I’m just going to peek inside, and see if *maybe*—”

“Maybe what?” he snaps. “Maybe they’re tacked up on the wall?”

“What do you *not* understand about this?!” I scream, whirling on him, shaking, my throat tight. “Do you know what it’s like to lose someone and not have *any* fucking idea if they—”

“*YES*!!!” he roars, so loud that I jump back.

Fuck.

“*Yes*,” Bane spits venously. “*Yes, I fucking know how that goddamn feels*!”

I drop my head.

“I… I'm sorry,” I whisper, dragging my eyes back to his. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

He looks at me with quiet intensity, slowly shaking his head. “Can you just…” he smiles wryly. “Can you just please leave this?”

“*No*,” I whisper hoarsely as tears bead in my eyes. “I can’t.”

Without another word, I turn and walk to Melinda’s bedroom door. My breath is shaky as I reach for the knob. But the second I touch it, the door swings wide open, like it wasn’t latched at all..

“*What the fuck*…”

Melinda’s room looks like it’s been ransacked.

Torn to pieces.

Every dresser drawer is open or completely yanked out, their contents strewn across the floor. The bed is tipped over, the bottom of the mattress and the pillows slashed and their stuffing ripped out. The nightstand lies broken on the ground, together with the glass shards of the lamp that was on

it. A reclining chair in the corner looks like a tiger attacked it, and the things in her bathroom cascade out the door and across the floor of the main room.

"*Get behind me*."

Bane firmly pulls me away from the doorway and steps into the room, his eyes darting to every corner. He checks behind the upturned bed, looks in the closet, then the bathroom.

He glances back at me, his face grim.

"I don't suppose Melinda has any enemies?"

I blink, looking at the chaos. "I mean, it's *Melinda*. She's too perpetually beige for that."

Bane nods. "Stay here in a second. I'm going to check the rest of the place just in case." He stops in front of me, cupping my face. "And then we're going to *get the fuck out of here*, okay?"

I nod, trembling. "Yeah, okay."

He kisses me, then slips out of Melinda's room.

I turn, surveying the wreckage. Part of me thinks we should just leave it as is, given that it's a crime scene.

…Then I remind myself how fucking stupid that sounds. As if my father will be inviting *the police* into his home to investigate.

I grab the side of the bed and bring it down onto four legs with a heavy thud.

"That was just me!" I yell, so Bane doesn't freak out.

I'm heading over to the dresser when a little book that was under the upturned bed catches my eye.

What the hell?

My eyes widen as I stoop down and pick up the Bible bound in green leather with gold leaf inlay.

This was Lark’s. She wasn’t religious, and I doubt she ever read a single page of the thing. But Agatha was raised Catholic, and Lark sometimes went to church with her on Sundays.

I remember when she gave her this Bible.

It had been Agatha’s, and she handed it down to Lark on her thirteenth birthday. I have no fucking idea why I remember that with such clarity right now, but I do.

Sure enough, when I open the inside cover, I smile when I see “Agatha Peltier” written in her gorgeous penmanship, with “Lark Peltier” written beneath it, in much newer ink and less tidy handwriting.

I know Melinda didn't *steal it* or anything. Maybe Lark thought Melinda would get better use out of it and gave it to her. Maybe even Agatha did, as a parting gift before she died.

I exhale and toss the Bible onto the bed.

…And my heart almost stops beating when two folded pieces of paper with torn edges slide out onto the messed-up sheets.

My skin tingles and a dull whine hums in my ears as I reach for the papers —both the two that slipped out from between the pages of the Bible, plus another three that I can see are still tucked inside.

A choked cry withers in my throat as my hand goes to my mouth.

They’re the pages from Lark’s diary.

A tear slides down my cheek as I smile, shaking my head.

Of *course* this is where Lark hid the pages she didn’t for whatever reason want in the diary anymore: it's the one place no one would ever think to look, because anyone who knew her knew she’d never once cracked this book open.

I sit on the edge of the bed and unfold the pages, glancing at the dates and shuffling them into order.

The first one is like most of the entries that came before it. Lark is confused, angry, and really hard on herself. She talks about lying to those around her, even me, and not being sure if the things she's worried about are even real.

I close my eyes.

I'm so sorry we were so similar.

The next entry is more of the same. So is the third, which includes a tirade about Scott being gross and flirty with her. Yeah, gross.

Then I feel like a hypocritical asshole for thinking so badly of my high school boyfriend flirting with my sister, when I'm *married to,* sleeping with, and completely in love with her former fiancé.

I reach for the fourth page. The first paragraph hooks me instantly.

> *Dear Boo,*
>
> *I know how to fix everything with Bane! I know how to apologize for being such a massive, crazy cunt to him. I know how to prove to him how much I love him, and that I'll be his forever.*
>
> *I can tell he's angry at me, even if he's hiding it like usual. But tomorrow night, I'm going to turn it all around.*
>
> *He'll see how much I love him and always will.*

I fold the first four pages up and tuck them into my pocket. Then, my hands shaking, I open the fifth and final page, hoping it will have the answers I want.

> *Dear Boo,*
>
> *I did it! I proved to him—we proved to each other—that we'll be together forever. That our love is never going to fade.*
>
> *I almost thought he wouldn't go for it. But when I told him my idea, he didn't hesitate.*

He said yes. Yes to US.

We did it in the back garden, behind the carriage house, using that cute little gas campfire dealie that Grandma got this past summer. It took FOREVER to heat the metal up. Like, seriously.

There's a tug at the back of my mind, but reaching for it is like trying to grab a handful of fog.

I thought I'd have to custom order the brand, but then I went to that restaurant supply warehouse down on the Bowery and found a pancake mold that was the PERFECT heart shape. At first we were going to brand each other, but then at the last second I wondered, what if the first of us went, and it was so bad that the second chickened out? Bane had told me he'd go second, and I know he'd keep his word. But my idea just seemed so…intimate.

So us.

The tug at the base of my skull yanks tighter, and the whining sound in my ears gets louder. I flinch, a spasm like a small lightning storm flickering through my head before I stab my eyes back down to the page gripped tightly in my shaking hands.

So I put my hand against his bare chest, over his heart. Once the pancake mold got hot enough, we both held the handle as we pressed the mold to our skin, half on his chest, half on my hand.

My throat closes up.

Boo, it hurt SO FUCKING MUCH.

My pulse thunders like a bass drum in my head.

Seriously, I thought I was going to pass out.

No.

No. No. No.

This isn’t fucking possible. It’s just *not*. It’s the de-escalation of my meds, that's all. I need to talk to Dr. Turov, because we're obviously doing it too quickly, and that's what's making me see things that aren’t real.

That *can’t* be real.

CANNOT.

> *But we did it, and I didn’t pass out, and now, it’s forever linking us—half a heart on his chest, half a heart on my hand.*

I can’t.

Fucking.

BREATHE.

I stand abruptly, my pulse racing through my veins like a freight train and the whine in my ears turning into a fucking scream. Lightning storms clash, thunder, and explode through my head, my vision flickering as my body spasms and jerks.

No.

I know who I am.

I AM who I fucking am, always have been.

I’m Dove.

My name is Dove fucking Marchetti. I dance ballet. I paint. I’m a recovering addict. I’m married to my dead sister’s high school sweetheart.

Everything runs and swirls together until the whole world is inky black, suffocating me, obliterating the light.

Choking out the difference between truth and lies.

Up and down.

Black and white.

Reality and fiction.

My hands are shaking uncontrollably and my whole body feels numb as my eyes drop to the last line of the final diary entry.

Burn scars are forever. Like us.

My trembling, unbelieving gaze slides from the page to the hand holding it.

…The hand with the little shiny pink crescent shaped scar tissue across the back of it. The scar I got from the fire that night.

That night when *Lark* died and *I* lived.

Reality crumbles and falls around me, turning to ash, choking me until I almost drop to my knees.

Lark died.

I lived.

Lark died.

I FUCKING LIVED.

But then my blurred vision stabs into the back of my hand again.

The shiny pink scar, in the shape of a curved crescent.

I used to call it my moon.

But it's not a moon at all.

It's half a fucking heart.

And suddenly, something that's been teasing and prodding and needling at the back of my head pierces through. I choke, gasping as it hits me full-force, and before I know what's happening, I'm whirling and staggering half blind out of Melinda's bedroom.

“Why do you never say my name?!”

Bane whirls when I find him standing in Lark’s room. His brow furrows when I scream it at him.

“What—

“WHY DO YOU NEVER SAY MY FUCKING NAME?!”

His jaw sets. “What are you talking about? I say your name all the—”

“*You don’t*!” I yell, shaking uncontrollably, shattering as my entire reality turns to dust in my mouth.

“You call me *baby*!!” I hurl at him. “Or *little bird*!!”

Bane’s face is grim as he looks at me, his eyes glinting like black steel.

“I *say* your—”

“Then say it!!” I roar. “*FUCKING SAY IT!! SAY MY FUCKING NAME!!*”

“YOU KNOW WHAT YOUR NAME IS!!” he roars back in a voice like thunder.

I choke as he eradicates the distance between us and grabs the front of my shirt in a fist, his eyes blazing.

He barely flinches when I reach up, grab his own shirt, and tear it open. Buttons scatter and bounce like shell casings across the ground. I barely even notice as my gaze lands like an accusation on the shiny pink crescent scar on his chest.

I slam my palm flat to his skin, and my scream shatters like frozen glass in my throat when I see it.

The branded heart across his chest and my hand.

And whatever was left of me *crumbles*.

I cry out, my head flashing like lightning and rattling like thunder. Flickers of scenes I don’t and do remember smash into my mind. Emotions flay into me like knives. Memories open my veins like razors.

We fall to our knees together, my hand still pressed to his chest as his hand slams on top of mine, keeping it tight against his skin as his wide, shattered black eyes lock with mine.

"*You know your name*," he chokes in a broken, haunted voice.

Acid tears stream down my face as I look into his eyes, the last of me cracking in two.

"*Bane! Bane—!*"

"*Your name is Lark Marchetti*."

The words scrape like daggers from his throat. His hands grab my face, holding it tightly as he presses his forehead to mine, tears rolling down our faces.

"*Your name is Lark Marchetti, and I have loved you with every piece of me since the moment I met you.*"

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38

BANE

Nine years ago:

Fuck this place.

I know how these people see me when I walk through the halls, tainting them with my very presence.

Dynastic wealth *always* looks down on new money. Especially when that new money took what the dynastic motherfuckers view as “a shortcut.” Never mind that these old-money shitheads *all*—and I do mean *all*—got their money in the form of an inheritance or a trust fund.

It doesn’t matter. To them, if you’re *not* one of them, you never can be.

Dad’s sent me here because he wants…

Fuck, I don’t know. Partly to offset what I think he sees as the poisonous environment of being brought up in the bratva. I mean, I *want* the track I’ve been set on. I'm eager to lead his underworld empire when he’s ready to hand it to me.

But until then, he wants me to go here, with the “normal” rich kids, unlike my friends, Roman and Laz, who are at The Pembroke School. Pembroke is another snobby pit of old-money snakes. But that place has been

“corrupted” by our kind—the *underworld* kind—for at least a generation or two.

Not here, though. Here, I’m the odd man out.

Mostly.

As if on cue, the new girl strides around the corner of the hallway. Well, technically a quarter of the fucking school are “new” today. It’s day one of the school year, and she’s one of the incoming freshmen.

Dove Marchetti: Cesare Marchetti’s princess of a daughter.

She flashes a killer smile as she sashays down the hall in her short plaid skirt, knee socks and open blouse, looking like a wet dream.

Not *my* fucking wet dream. But definitely one for just about every other guy who attends this fucking school.

They won't give a shit that she’s “dirty new money” like me because it’s overshadowed by that pushup bra, big dark eyes and million-watt smile.

“Don’t drool, Viggo.”

My jaw clenches before I turn. Scott Hathaway, “of the Upper East Side Hathaways” as he has a nauseating habit of saying, is a grade behind me. But despite being a cretin, a creep, and a piece of shit, the motherfucker is royalty in this school. And at Pembroke, that’s saying something.

He’s already the varsity quarterback in his sophomore year and has the entourage around him to back it up.

But none of that is why I don’t just beat the fuck out of him.

“What’s the matter, *Viggo*?” Scott grins at me. “You jizz in your pants already?”

It’s probably the millionth time I’ve heard him or one of his little friends call me that. Viggo as in Viggo Mortensen, the lead actor in *Eastern Promises*, a movie about—wait for it—the Russian Bratva.

How *fucking* original.

But the single most annoying thing about this little bitch isn't the dumb name he calls me. It's not his obnoxious, all-American-douchebag persona.

It's the fact that *I can't hit him*.

Not because I'll get in trouble or whatever. But because Dad is in the middle of negotiating a *huge* deal with Mitchell Hathaway, Scott's equally douchebaggy father.

I know. But as Dad's told me easily a dozen times, "You gotta get down and eat with the pigs if you want to get fat."

Dad knows what he's doing. He built the empire I'll lead one day from fucking nothing. I also happen to know that this deal he's working out with Mitchell Hathaway will eventually mean we fucking *own* that cunt.

But until that happy day, Nikolai Antonov's son categorically cannot, sadly, beat the ever-loving shit out of Mitchell Hathaway's son.

It's been *very* hard to keep myself in check. Not just stopping myself from punching his lights out, but also from telling him that his dad is just as fucking dirty as he says mine is. Scott doesn't know about that side of his dad's business, and *fuck* would it be sweet to be the one to clue him in and watch him realize he's just as sullied as the rest of us.

But I bite my tongue, daily, because that's what my father needs me to do.

"Tell me, Viggo…" Scott grins, nodding past me. I glance back to see Dove surrounded by a gaggle of rich, horny Thornfield Prep motherfuckers.

Scott snickers, elbowing his buddies. "You got a little stiffy for that freshman? Well, too bad," he smirks. "That chick is *mine*."

To be clear, there's nothing little about my "stiffy". But if the rumors I've heard from some of the cheerleaders who occasionally buy weed from me are true—I mean, who the hell *else* are they going to buy from at this buttoned-up shithole—*Scott's* "stiffy" sure is.

"Cool." I pat his shoulder a *bit* harder than I should, winking at him. "Good luck with that baby dick of yours. I'm sure she'll love it."

His face darkens as I brush past him.

“The fuck did you just say, bitch!” he yells after me.

“It’s the motion of the ocean, right, Scotty?” I yell back as I turn to grin and hold up two middle fingers at him. “Not the size of the boat!”

Eat a bag of dicks, motherfucker.

That bitchy cheerleader is *all* his.

I pull the pack of smokes out of my back pocket as I step outside and slip behind the athletic wing. Smoking isn’t permitted on campus, and it’s actually one of the rules they enforce.

Like I care.

I slip a cigarette between my lips and light it with a flick of my Zippo.

“Can I bum one of those?”

I whirl, then do a double take.

Fuck me.

Okay, they’re not twins, but she looks freakishly like the cheerleader princess I just ignored inside. Sort of. I frown. Eh, maybe it’s just their faces.

The girl looking at me—expectantly, like she’s already so sure I’ll give her a cigarette that she’s annoyed she doesn’t have it yet—is another freshman. She’s petite, with a build that screams athlete.

“I dance,” she says flatly. “Ballet.”

I frown. “What?”

“You were checking out my legs.”

“I…wasn’t.”

She smirks. “Yeah, you were.”

I totally was.

“I dance ballet.”

“So you said,” I say dryly.

She sighs. “So…where we at with that smoke?”

I snort in spite of myself, taking a slow drag as my gaze drifts over her.

She’s cute.

Scratch that. She’s fucking stunning. But she downplays it in this arty-punk way. The blonde hair, with a few light blue and purple streaks. The anarchy symbol painted in…is that White-Out?…on the side of her Mary Janes.

“Here.”

I take the cigarette out of my mouth and hand it to her.

Fuckin’ smooth, self.

She takes it with a small nod. “Thanks.”

I nod back, lighting a new one for myself.

“A little young to be smoking, aren’t you?”

“Aren’t *you*?” She winces overdramatically. “Oh, sorry, unless you’re twenty-one and repeating the eleventh grade for like the fifth time?”

I smirk, nodding my chin at her hair. “They’re going to nail you to the wall for that hair, you know.”

“Really?”

“Really. Welcome to Thornfield, where fun goes to die a painful death, dressed head-to-toe in Brooks Brothers.”

She giggles, her dark eyes twinkling as she pushes a lock of blue back from her face.

She puts her hand out. “What’s your name?”

“Bane,” I say, taking hers.

“Bane? As in, the bane of my existence?”

“If you ask me nicely.”

She grins again.

Fuck, she's got a pretty smile.

She hasn't let go of my hand yet, either.

"Nice to meet you, Bane. I'm Lark. Wanna be friends?"

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39

DOVE

AT FIRST, I have no words.

I just cry.

I fucking cry and cry, screaming into his chest. Then I cry some more, because I'm angry with myself for crying in the first place, instead of dropping to my knees and begging his forgiveness.

Because as the truth sinks into me like razorblades, the realization and recognition of that truth flows out of my veins like blood.

I'm not Dove.

I'm the other.

The razorblade twists, gouging and carving deeper.

I'm not Dove.

I'm Lark.

And *I'm* the villain of this story.

Eventually, the only sound is my hitched, ragged breath as he holds me in his arms, both of us still kneeling in the middle of the room.

When I shift because my knees are starting to ache, Bane pulls me with him as he moves to sit against the wall. I slide down to the floor beside him, numb, just staring into space, my hands limp in my lap.

We sit in silence for so long I lose track of time.

Bane's brow furrows. I glance at him curiously when he leans over and reaches underneath the old desk. He smirks, pulling out an ancient, half-crumpled pack of cigarettes with a loop of duct tape glued to the back of it.

"Agatha hated it when you smoked," he says quietly, slipping one between his lips and lighting it with a faded pink plastic lighter stuffed into the pack.

The end of it glows and catches as he inhales. I feel my throat tighten as he exhales a thin plume of smoke through his lips. He plucks the cigarette away from his mouth and hands it my way without looking at me.

"Oh, no, I quit after rehab."

Bane says nothing, just staring straight ahead. He doesn't pull the smoldering cigarette back from me.

"Actually…thanks," I mumble, taking it from him. My fingertips brush the backs of his knuckles as I do, and I feel a deep, dark pulse between us as I bring the smoke to my lips.

"You always looked like her."

His voice is husky, his eyes still stabbing into the opposite wall. I take a long drag of the cigarette, feeling the dry bite of the smoke hitting the back of my throat. I exhale, hoping to God the nicotine calms my frantic pulse, and hand the cigarette back to him.

Bane's eyes stay glued ahead as he takes another puff, gray smoke curling like ribbons around his head and drifting on still air toward the ceiling.

"For being fraternal, not identical twins…" He shakes his head. "You always did look so similar. It was the personalities and the way you presented yourselves to the world that were different. Dove was the popular cheerleader. You were—"

"The unpopular psycho," I grumble before I can stop myself.

Bane snorts, one side of his mouth lifting in a small smirk. He takes another slow drag of the cigarette and hands it back to me, his face darkening.

“When Antonio and the rest of your father’s men barged into the house on Staten Island, the room you were in was the first door they kicked in. And there you were, black hair shaved—”

“I think it was purple,” I say quietly.

Bane shakes his head. “No, you’d dyed it raven-black three days before.”

My gaze drops to the floor. “*Oh*,” I say.

“In that place, with your hair shaved off and the rest of your personality stripped away by that motherfucker,” he growls, “when Antonio kicked in the door, he thought *you* were Dove; Cesare’s daughter and princess of the Marchetti empire. So *you* are who they grabbed. Antonio was there to get you both, obviously, but his boss’s daughter was the priority. They were carrying you out when the chemicals from Lorenzo's meth lab went up and the place exploded.”

He takes the cigarette from where I'm holding it out to him, still looking dead ahead, like he can’t look at me.

Maybe like he doesn’t want to.

“Then that fucking roof beam came down and hit the side of your head, and took your memory…”

He closes his eyes, his mouth turning grim.

“When you woke up in the hospital, everyone was calling you Dove. They all thought that's who you *were*. And *you* thought you were Dove because that’s what everyone called you. They pressed you to remember things. They showed you pictures and told you stories, and you remembered *Dove’s life* because you had been *in* her life since day one.”

His Adam’s apple bobs.

“You remembered those birthdays because you were there too,” Bane growls like broken glass. “You remembered her triumphs and wins, because you celebrated them with her. You remembered her sad days because you were there to comfort her.”

A bitter, broken sound cracks the silence, and it takes me a second to realize it's *me*.

Tears roll down my cheeks, my breath coming unevenly. I take the cigarette back when he offers it, my hands shaking as I suck greedily at the smoke. I inhale deeply, filling my lungs with black poison, trying to drown myself in it.

"Lark."

I startle to hear that name from his lips. I slowly turn to look at him with haggard eyes. Bane nods his chin at the cigarette between my fingers, and when I look at it in a daze, I see it's burned all the way down to the filter.

Wordlessly, Bane pulls an old mug off the top of the desk and sets it on the floor between us. He drops the burned stub of the cigarette into it, pulls a fresh one from the pack, and lights it. He exhales slowly and passes the new one to me.

"Does…" I shiver as I bring the cigarette to my lips. "Does my dad know?"

Bane shakes his head thoughtfully.

"Honestly? I don't know. I've wondered, though. If he did…"

"All I've ever been to him is a bargaining chip to further his empire," I say bitterly. "I mean, at least in the last seven years…that I've been her."

By which I mean, even if Dad *did* realize it was Lark and not Dove who came out of that building alive, if everyone was *calling* me Dove, and I *thought* I was Dove…

Well, he still has a daughter to trade via an arranged marriage.

Which leads to the next question that comes burning to the front of my mind.

"Does he know?" I croak. "I mean, about—"

Bane glances at me. "That he had twin daughters? I'm not sure," he says quietly. "I knew it from you years ago that Dove's mom had died during childbirth. But then, that video…" His eyes tighten with sadness and

sympathy as he shakes his head again. “I don’t know if Cesare knows you’re his daughter, or if he was an absent enough father that he didn’t even notice that you *weren’t* Dove—”

“You didn’t either,” I blurt, bitterness creeping into my voice. I look away, wiping my eyes with the back of my hand.

“I was in pain,” he chokes. “I was *dying* inside, because I thought I’d lost you. And when I saw who I was told was *Dove*, alive and well, at *your* funeral…”

I turn to watch his face crumple as he sucks furiously at the cigarette, eyes stabbing into the opposite wall as he shakes his head.

“I was *so fucking angry*,” he hisses. “That Dove would live through that, and *you* wouldn’t. I was so bitter that the one thing I had that made me happy and stopped the screaming in my head and the nightmares had been ripped away from me, and the very fucking person who’d talked her into going out that night was the one person who’d come home.”

He passes the fresh cigarette to me and looks up, exhaling a thin smoke curl.

“I was blinded,” he growls. “By pain, and rage, and my *need* for vengeance, and I pushed you away.”

We’re both quiet for another minute, just passing the cigarette back and forth, until it burns out too. Bane drops it into the mug, and I reach for a third.

Not because I want the nicotine. I need the burn of the smoke in my lungs and the sting of it in my eyes. I need the cigarette occupying my hands, because if not, I’m going to pick my cuticles to fucking ribbons.

“How long have you known.”

The question drops like deadweight from my mouth. When he remains silent as he takes the cigarette from my fingers, I turn to him.

“*How long*,” I choke, staring at him as he drags on the smoke. “How long have you known I’m—”

“Since the roof.”

Bane nods, still looking at the wall in front of us. “Since that night on the roof, on the eighty-third floor. When you called for a truce, and shook my hand…”

His head swivels, eyes dropping to my hands twisting in my lap. He points with the cigarette to the burn on the back of my right hand. Then I tremble when he takes that hand with his free one, running his thumb over the scar.

“I felt this when I took your hand…” He swallows heavily. “And I knew.”

The sound that I hear inside me is my heart breaking in half. It’s the truth hitting me like a punch to the gut, doubling me over as all my air, my strength, and my very soul are all knocked out of me.

Bane’s dark, piercing gaze drags up to mine. “I knew you were the girl I loved ever since the night we didn’t jump, baby.”

Tears instantly well up in my eyes, running in hot rivulets down my face as I swallow back a sob.

“*Don’t call me that,*” I choke. “Please don’t ever call me that.”

He frowns.

“*Baby*?” I spit, feeling sick, unable to stop the tears and the snot from choking my voice. “I don’t deserve *babys*.” My face falls as I look up at him, my heart in my hands. “Bane, I was *horrible* to you,” I whisper brokenly.

His brow knits. “No, you were—”

“Yes, I was,” I insist. “I’ve *read* the diary,” I say bitterly. “I *lied* to you. Manipulated you. Said awful, shitty things…” My face twists. “I was a monster to you,” I breathe, my voice cracking as I reach for the cigarette and bring it to my lips. I take a heavy drag, my body trembling as the full weight of what I did sinks into me. “I was a cruel, vengeful, *bitch* to—“

“You wrote down your worst thoughts in that dairy,” he growls. “Just like people posting the *best* versions of themselves on social media, you took all your horrible parts and put them in that book to get them out of your head.”

“*Stop it*,” I choke. “Don’t you dare try to rewrite history. Don’t you *dare* try to say that you never hated me for the bullshit I pulled and the way I treated you, Bane.”

He whips his head around to stare at me. “You think I never hated you?” he spits venomously. “Is that what you want to hear?! Fine!” he roars. “Yeah, Lark, I fucking hated your bullshit sometimes! I hated the way you acted, and the mind games, and the way you’d try to make me jealous by flirting with that motherfucker Scott Hathaway right in front of me!!” His lips snarl, teeth glinting as he glares at me. “I hated all that,” he spits. “But most of all?!”

His cold dark eyes pierce right into my soul.

“I hated that I couldn’t fucking hate *you*. I hated you for making me love you, and never *once* releasing me from your spell, no matter what you did or said.”

The air leaves my body with a whoosh as his words slam into me like a fist to the stomach.

But I deserve it, and so much worse.

“But when you love something,” he continues, “you love it for all that it is. You don’t love it *despite* its flaws. You love it *because of* those flaws.” He yanks the cigarette from my fingers and brings it viciously to his mouth. “I think that’s partly why I trapped you in this marriage once I realized who you were. To keep you caged with me.”

My heart wrenches as he takes a deep breath, then turns to let his eyes nail me to the fucking floor.

“*And* I was fucking angry,” he growls. “*So fucking angry*. Angry with myself for pushing you away in my grief and pain and not realizing what had happened. Angry with you…” He closes his eyes, squeezing them shut. “For all of it, and the way you spiraled so hard at the end. So yeah, part of all of this was that *I wanted to punish you*.”

He shoves the cigarette back my way.

“But I was also angry for all the shit you’d done to yourself. The self-harm. The drugs. Being on that roof looking to kill yourself. All the fucking *men* that came after I shoved you out of my life—”

“I lied.”

The words pop out of my mouth in a jumbled rush.

“There… There weren’t dozens,” I mumble.

I take one last drag of the cigarette, my throat on fire after sharing *three* of these fucking things with him. I drop it into the mug and twist my body toward him.

“Not dozens,” I say quietly. I reach for his hand, tangling my fingers with his. “Not *a* dozen. Not even half a dozen— ”

“Lark—”

“*Or five, or four, or three—*”

“Baby—“

“*There was never anyone after you*,” I choke. I swivel on my knees to face him fully and take both his hands in mine, holding them tight as my body is wracked by a sudden shudder. “Even though I didn’t *know* there was a you.”

Bane’s face is hard, his eyes sparking with dark fire as he turns to face me.

“There was no one after you for me, either,” he says quietly.

My heart twists, a choke ripping from my throat as I clench his hands tighter.

“And I lied, too,” he growls, his eyes locked with mine as he leans into me.

I lean in as well, until my forehead touches his. My breath is shaky and haggard, my pulse skipping in a staccato thud.

“*About*?”

Bane closes his eyes, inhaling deeply like he's trying to breathe me into his very lungs.

"I never actually did hate you," he breathes. His eyes open to lock with mine as his hands cup my face. "I'm incapable of anything but loving you. That's my flaw."

A tear trickles down my cheek and over his fingers. I tremble, breathing in his scent and trying to press my forehead to his tightly enough that we absorb each other.

"I've got so many flaws," I whisper. "I don't know why you would love—"

"Because to me, you're *perfect*," he growls. "Because your only flaw was loving me back."

I don't know who technically kisses the other. All I know is, when our lips crush together, and when the sob of agony, love, and rebirth wrenches from my throat?

I'm home.

I know who I am.

I know *I love him*.

And nothing on Earth will ever take those truths away.

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DOVE

OBVIOUSLY, I don't remember *a lot* from my childhood. But one thing that didn't get knocked out by the hit to my head is Agatha reading me the story of Rip Van Winkle—the mountain man who falls asleep under a tree and accidentally naps for twenty years.

That's kind of how it feels to suddenly realize almost everything about your life is based on a lie, or at the very least a colossal case of mistaken identity.

That you're not who you think you are.

That your life belongs to someone else.

I am *not* Dove Marchetti.

At the same time, I'm not really Lark Peltier, either.

That's the tricky bit. It's not *just* that I'm not the girl I thought I was. It's not *just* that I'm someone else.

It's the fact that that "someone else" is the sister of the girl I thought I was.

And if that's not *completely batshit confusing* enough, here's one more fun twist: the girl I *actually* am is supposed to be dead. Meanwhile the girl I've been *existing as*, who everyone in my world but one man thinks of me of as, *is* dead.

What's the saying? Oh, yeah: it's complicated.

Part of me wanted to just stay in bed all the next day and hide from the world. Those beauty ads that talk about being a “whole new you?” Turns out, waking up as “a whole new you” is abso-fucking-lutely terrifying. It becomes a sci-fi horror movie, or an episode of *Black Mirror*.

Do I tell people? Or do I keep living this lie, with all my friends still calling me by the name of a dead girl they never actually knew?

Hence, a huge part of me wanting to hide in bed for the day.

Or, you know, the next six-months-to-forever.

Bane was also on Team Stay In Bed, especially since we barely slept last night.

There was just too much to catch up on.

I told him about Oxford Hills Academy, in England, where my dad sent me to finish high school after I started to spiral in my senior year at Thornfield. I told him about *throwing* myself into ballet, there. My sister and I had religiously danced together our whole lives, and with her gone, it’s like I started putting in twice the blood, sweat, and tears to achieve the dream for the both of us.

I told him about the *relentless* hours that took, and how Adderall eventually turned into cocaine. How when *that* stopped quieting the nightmares and the survivors guilt I was drowning in, I found something that would.

I cried while telling him about heroin. About the two times I overdosed and only didn’t die because strangers brought me to ERs.

About waking up face-down on a hotel bed with no idea how I got there, two men I didn’t know trying to take off my clothes before I managed to run away.

About sleeping outside on a park bench in the rain, because escaping reality through getting high was more of a priority than shelter.

The abject terror of getting my blood drawn at a walk-in clinic to see if the needle someone shared with me had given me HIV or hepatitis.

Bane didn’t get angry—at least, not with me. He didn't judge, or tell me what I should have done differently. He just held me while I cried into his chest, telling him about the nightmares when I started detoxing in rehab.

The times I wanted to kill myself.

The times I tried.

Wanting to die because I didn’t know any other way to escape the darkness my mind had plunged into.

I picked off every scab. Showed him every goddam scar. Opened every vein.

I didn’t think it was possible to love another person as much as I loved him last night, when I bared my completely naked, bruised, and scarred soul to him.

But then I woke up and realized I loved him even more this morning.

I probably *should* have stayed in bed with him all day, just to sleep. But there are still major questions that I *need* answers to, even if they hurt.

That’s why I find myself staring up at the front of my dad’s house.

I *have to* find out what my father knows about, well, *me*. Does he know he had another daughter? Does he truly think I’m Dove?

I shiver.

And why was I told my whole life that my mother died giving birth to me, when I’ve seen video proof that she didn't?

I climb the steps to the front door and ring the bell. Melinda opens the door, looking surprised and startled to see me.

“Oh!” She blinks quickly. “I’m sorry, Dove, I wasn’t expecting you.”

I smile, my lie falling easily from my lips. “Sorry, I was nearby and thought I'd drop in.”

“Of course,” she says, stepping aside. “Please, come in.”

“Is he home?”

He is. I’ve been sitting in Bane’s car for the last hour just down the street, watching the house, waiting to make sure I saw my dad in the windows.

“Yes.” She smiles her usual quiet, reserved smile at me. “I was just going to make him some coffee and bring it to his office. Would you like some as well?”

I nod. “Thank you, that’d be great.” Then my brow furrows. “Hey, Melinda?”

She turns back. “Yes?”

“I, uh…” I frown. “I’m sorry, I have to ask. Is everything…okay…with you?”

She gives me a politely puzzled look.

“I was in the apartment downstairs yesterday,” I say quietly, my face burning. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have just gone in. But I was looking for something in…” I gulp. “In Lark’s old room. I, um…your bedroom door was ajar, and—”

Finally, she smiles. “Oh, dear, I’m sorry. You saw the mess.”

“Y-yes. Is everything okay?”

She laughs a small, somewhat stale laugh, which is standard for her.

“Yes, of course. I apologize if you were worried. I get into these reorganization moods, and I’m afraid I become a bit of a whirlwind.”

Okay, *thank God*.

She smiles a little more broadly and actually takes one of my hands in hers. “I appreciate you checking in with me, though.”

I exhale nervously. “I’m not going to lie, I was kinda freaked out. It looked like someone had ransacked your room.”

She laughs, shaking her head. “No, nothing sinister, I promise.” She smiles again. “Come, I’ll see you to your father’s study.”

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. Melinda and her perma-Downton Abbey vibe.

Dad looks up from his desk, his brows furrowing when he sees me.

“Dove?”

“Hi.” I force a smile to my lips. “I was in the neighborhood and was hoping I could talk to you?”

He frowns. “About?”

I clear my throat. “A couple of things, actually.”

His brow stays furrowed as he nods. “Sure,” he shrugs, standing and gesturing to a pair of couches by the windows. “Melinda was just about to bring me some coffee.”

“Coming right up, sir,” Melinda says with a slightly flirtatious smile.

Someone’s got a crush on the boss…

“Have a seat, honey,” Dad says gruffly, taking a seat on one couch and nodding to the one across the coffee table from it. “What’s this about?”

I inhale and exhale slowly.

“I wanted to ask you about Mom.”

He frowns, thrown off a little but hiding it well. “I see,” he says doubtfully. Then his face softens a little as he looks at me. “Sorry, it’s just that you don’t ask about her much.”

“I know,” I murmur.

He shrugs. “Well, what did you want to know?”

“How many kids did you guys have?”

I’ve ambushed him with it on purpose, hoping that if he *does* know about my twin, it’ll show on his face.

But all I get is an amused expression. “Dove, I have a pretty busy schedule today.”

When I don’t respond, he scowls back at me.

“Is this a joke? We had one child: you. And then Tiffany and I had your sister Chiara.”

I hold the silence for a little longer than normal. Dad looks confused and a bit annoyed.

“Was that…it for the questions?”

Melinda knocks discreetly on the door and then walks in demurely, carrying a tray with two cups and saucers, a metal coffeepot, creamers, and sugar. She sets it all down on the table between us with a quick glance at my dad. He glances back, his throat bobbing before he nods to her.

“Thank you, Melinda.”

“Of course, sir.”

Dad exhales as she steps out, reaching for the coffee and pouring some in my cup and then his. As he does, the light from the window falls a little differently across his face. I peer a little closer at a strange shadow near his ear and then realize I’m looking at a bruise.

“Are you okay?”

He frowns. “Huh?”

“Your face…”

Dad brings a hand up to the spot near his temple and shrugs. “Oh, that.” He chuckles. “I went to the boxing gym with Antonio the other day and was reminded of my age.”

I grin. He grins back as he stirs cream and sugar into his coffee. Then he looks up at me.

“Dove, I *do* have a busy day.”

“I understand.”

I bring my black coffee to my lips, blowing across the steaming surface before I take a sip.

“How did she die?”

He frowns. “Who?”

“Mom.”

Dad sighs as I take another sip of coffee. “Honey, you *know* how. There were complications during your birth. She hemorrhaged, and they couldn’t stop it.” His jaw sets. “If it’s a comfort, she was on pain meds and didn’t suffer,” he says.

I stare at him, a cold knot forming in my stomach.

Why is he lying to me?

In the video, she’s very much alive, and Dove and I are very much born.

“You were there?”

He frowns. “Of course. It was a very sad day, but it’s how I got you.”

He’s still lying, and I’m starting to realize how frighteningly *good at it* he is.

I bring the cup back to my lips. When I take another sip, I feel my head spin a little. I quickly set my coffee down, steadying myself with a hand on the couch.

Dad frowns. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I just…” The lightheadedness comes again. “I just feel sort of dizzy…”

Just as he’s opening his mouth to reply, the color drains from his face.

“Dad?”

His eyes blink rapidly.

“Are you okay?”

“I…yeah…” He groans, his face twisting. “*No*.”

As I try to tell him to take a breath, the whole room tilts a little.

The coffee cup falls from my hand, shattering on the tray in front of me. I barely register it, my vision swimming and my body swaying.

What the fuck is happening?

“Dad, I…I don’t feel—”

“Didn't anyone ever teach you not to steal things?”

The voice is startling, but I’m slow and sluggish to turn. When I do, I frown in murky confusion.

Melinda has a gleaming silver gun pointed right at me, her mouth a grim line.

“*Melinda*!” Dad sputters. “Melinda, what the fuck are you—”

“You shouldn’t take things that aren't yours,” she mutters coldly, looking right at me. “If *I’d* been your mother, I would have taught you that.”

My vision swims as I try to hold my hands up.

“*Hang on*,” I slur. “Wait…Melinda, I didn’t…okay, I shouldn’t have gone in—”

“But you did,” she says calmly, her hand tightening around the gun. "You took something from my room that you shouldn't have. I think you also *read* something you shouldn't have."

She draws in a slow breath, the gun still pointing right at me.

"Didn't you," she purrs. "*Lark*."

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BANE

“NIKO? *ETO TY*?”

I smile as I shrug off my coat and hang it by the side door to the kitchen.

“Just me, Oksana!”

A second later, my father’s housekeeper pokes her head around the corner, beaming at me. “Bane! I did not know you were coming!”

“I wanted to surprise you.”

I grin, crossing the large kitchen to give her a big hug and a kiss on the cheek.

I’ve known Oksana since I was ten. She was already Peak Grandma then, and only looks even more the part as she gets older. Dad’s flat-out told her she can retire any time, and he’s happy to pay her a full salary and have her stay in the house to live out that retirement in style. She always says no.

I think she’s one of those people who equates “not working” with “one foot in the grave.”

I mean, she *is* Russian.

“*Kak dela, babushka*?”

How are you, grandma?

Oksana clucks her tongue and shakes flour-dusted fingers at me. “Your Russian is getting rusty, *zaychik*.”

“I’m getting too old to be called little bunny,” I grumble.

She snickers at me. “I disagree…*zaychik*.”

I roll my eyes and glance at her hands. “What are you making?”

“*Pelmeni*.”

Fuck yeah. My stomach rumbles. Oksana makes *killer* Russian dumplings.

“Are they ready? I could eat.”

She playfully slaps at my arm “*Nyet*, not until dinner. But you should stay.” She arches a brow at me. “Where is your lovely bride, by the way?”

There’s a sharp duality of feelings that twist in me when Oksana asks about her.

The first, of course, is the glowing warmth that I feel deep in my chest whenever I think about the woman I love. But the second, polar opposite feeling that I get at the exact same time is pain.

Pain and *regret*.

I knew about her addictions and her demons, and I knew about rehab. But the visceral sensation of my heart being sawed from my chest when she told me all the gritty details of that time in her life breaks me in two.

The times she could have been devoured by the world, and the times she could have died.

The times I wasn’t there for her.

And what makes it hurt even more and is *knowing* that I’m no innocent bystander to the darkness her life spiraled into.

I’m the one who pointed her in that direction. I’m the motherfucker who cornered a grieving girl, still trying to process her own trauma, at her best friends funeral, and told her “this is your fault. You did this.”

I’m not actually sure how I’ll ever atone for that. But I do know I’ll die loving her with every single part of me, even if it barely scratches that debt.

“At her father’s,” I grunt. “She…”

She wants to find out if he knows that half her life she's been living a lie.

I smile. “She’s just picking something up.”

Oksana gives me a look, wagging her brows before she turns away.

“Oksana.”

“*Da?*”

“What… What was that look?”

She smiles to herself, glancing back at me and waving me off with a hand. “Nothing,” she chuckles. “Just…nothing.”

I stiffen. “Is this *nothing* about Cesare?”

She tips her head side to side, looking at the ceiling.

“*Oksana…*”

“It is unprofessional to gossip, *zaychik*.”

I roll my eyes. “It’s also rude to hint at big secrets and then not deliver.”

She laughs, sighing. “*Fine*. There’s a WhatsApp group I’m in—”

“You know how to use a smartphone?”

Oksana whirls and whacks me on the wrist with her wooden spoon.

“I’m only seventy-nine, not two hundred,” she mutters darkly.

“I'm sorry. Who’s in your WhatsApp group?”

She shrugs. “Mostly other *babushkas*. Housekeepers, cooks, maids.”

I smirk to myself, and I’m suddenly more glad than ever that I hired Alfred when I bought the penthouse, and not some *babushka* who’d be gossiping about me to Oksana on WhatsApp.

“And what do the *babushkas* say about Cesare Marchetti?”

She grins impishly. “Did you know he has a second woman come in every other week to help his housekeeper clean?”

“I did not.”

“Well, he does,” she cackles. “And she’s from Moscow.” Oksana grins. “There’s a bit of gossip at the Marchetti house!”

I look at her expectantly. “Which is?”

She waggles her brows salaciously. “It would appear Don Marchetti is *shlyat'sya po babam.*”

Holy shit.

That's Russian slang for “sleeping around”.

“Cesare is having an affair?”

“*Da*!” Oksana giggles like a schoolgirl. “But I mean, you’ve met his wife, yes?” She makes a face. “A frigid cow, that one. No meat on her bones, and—”

“So he’s having an affair with the Russian housecleaner?”

Oksana hoots out a laugh. “Daria wishes! No, not with her.” She grins as she leans close, lowering her voice dramatically. “With the housekeeper—Melinda.”

I frown. “This is confirmed? Or just a rumor?”

“Oh, confirmed,” Oksana tsks. “Daria’s been working part-time for that family for decades. This housekeeper…Melinda…she’s been sleeping with Mr. Marchetti on and off for years. Daria’s *heard them* a few times,” she giggles. Then she sighs. “It's sad, though. Daria says Melinda used to have it in her head that she might be the next Mrs. Marchetti. But then your father-in-law met that Felicity woman, and…oop! She stays the housekeeper.”

My pulse picks up.

Oksana shakes her head. “Daria was saying that Melinda *hates* the new Mrs. Marchetti. Views her as the woman who took her man.” She rolls her eyes. “Delusional.”

My jaw ticks. “Melinda has *told* Daria all of this?”

Oksana scowls. “Of course not! But the woman has eyes. Melinda is *terrible* to Felicity. Spits in her tea, rinses her toothbrush in the toilet.” She giggles. “I only laugh because Mrs. Marchetti is so rude to Daria all the time. But I shouldn't.” She shakes her head. “Daria says Melinda is *nevmenyáemaya.* She’s just as bad to the other daughter Chiara, too.”

I go still. “What?”

“*Da*, I know,” she sighs.

“Oksana.”

She glances back at me. “Hmm?”

“Daria actually called her *yebanútaya*? Or *nevmenyáemaya*.”

The difference is important.

Especially when my fucking wife is over at that house right now.

Yebanútaya is like calling someone “psycho”, or “nuts.” It’s casual. I call Nero *yebanúty* all the time, because we’re friends and fuck around like that.

Nevmenyáemaya, on the other hand, means literally, clinically unwell. And Russians don’t say that lightly. Especially not *babushkas* like Oksana or Daria.

Oksana raises her brow and nods sagely. “Oh, *nevmenyáemaya*. The woman has a record, you know.”

No.

No, I did *not* fucking know.

I yank out my phone and tap on my wife's contact.

“What sort of record?” I growl as I wait for her to pick up.

“Assault,” Oksana says, clucking her tongue. “Daria found something in the trash about it…some mail that Melinda tore up and threw—Bane!”

She turns to smack me with her spoon, since she hates me making a phone call while she and I are talking. But when she sees the look on my face, she freezes.

“What’s going on, *zaychik*?”

What’s going on is Lark isn’t answering her fucking phone and my mind is going to the absolute worst-case scenario.

When she doesn’t answer my second and then third calls, I give up and march over to my coat.

“Everything okay?” Oksana says, concern all over her lined face.

“*Da*, all good.” I quickly walk back to her and kiss her cheek. “I just have to check on something.”

I don’t want to freak her out.

But I do need to go.

Right the fuck now.

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DOVE

EVERYTHING STILLS as I stare at Melinda, pointing a gun at me.

"*Melinda*!" Dad barks. I see the same swimmy look in his eyes that I feel in mine.

My gaze drops to the coffee cup in front of me.

Oh no.

"Mel!" Dad roars louder. "Stop pointing that fucking gun at my daughter!"

Melinda lets out a cold, barbed laugh. "Oh, suddenly you're father of the year, Cesare?! *Now* you care about her?!"

I blink, feeling sluggish and cold; like my reality has just had syrup poured all over it, slowing everything down, making it hard to talk or breathe or even think.

Did she just call him Cesare, not Mr. Marchetti, or sir?

My brows pinch.

And did he just call her *Mel*?

"Dad…"

"I'm handling it, honey," my dad growls as he glances at me and the gun aimed at me. His gaze grows darker and more menacing as it switches back to Melinda. "Put it down, Mel! We can talk about this!"

Melinda laughs coldly. “Talk!? Like we *talked* when I found you tearing apart my room yesterday?”

“You know *damn well* what I was looking for, you bitch!” Dad roars back at her. “Proof that you tried to blow up my goddamn wife, so that I could fucking *hang you* with it!”

Fucking WHAT?

“I just want you to *talk* to me!” Melinda screams at him. “We’ve *talked* so many times, Cesare! But always in secret! Always whispered in the dark!”

Dad’s face turns red and his bleary eyes slide to me.

“Dad, what is she talking—”

“I’m talking about how he tells me he loves me!” Melinda spits. “How he can’t get me out of his head! How we’re meant to be together!” She turns to Dad, her face falling. “And we *are*, Cesare! The way you kiss me! The way you touch me…”

What.

The.

Fuck.

Gross.

“Mel,” Dad mumbles. “Let’s talk about this *alone*, okay?”

She shakes her head decisively.

“It’s always another time, Cesare. Always *soon*. Never right when I need you.”

“Mel—“

“*You told me I was the one*!” she screams at him. A tear wells in her eye and rolls down her cheek. “And then two weeks later you met Felicity and I was cast away, back to being your *maid*!”

My eyes dart to my father. *Holy shit.*

The guilt is all over his face.

“But you still *need me*, don’t you, Cesare?” Melinda says coldly. “When that skinny bitch you married says no, that’s when you need me, isn’t it?”

“*Dad—*”

“I’m *handling it*, honey,” he growls. He drags his gaze back to Melinda. “Put the gun down, Mel. I’m not having this conversation while you’re—”

“*You never want to have this conversation*!!!” she bellows.

There’s a wild look in eyes. A feverish darkness.

A madness.

Fear curls and tightens in my chest.

“Well, we’re not fucking having it while you're pointing a gun at—”

“Please!” Melinda screams. “*Please* tell me how much you care about her!” She laughs coldly. “The *backup* daughter.”

My eyes dart to my father, the question bubbling on my lips. But the second his eyes meet mine, cold, brutal certainty stabs into me.

“*You knew*.”

The words fall like a choked prayer from my lips.

Dad doesn’t respond. He doesn’t protest, or deny, or yell, or…*anything*.

Just looks at me with this frozen deer-in-headlights expression on his face.

“*Holy shit*…” I breathe, my blood turning to lead in my veins. I stare at him breathlessly, unblinking, my mind churning to a stop.

“*Honey—*”

“What’s my name.”

My father’s lips press together. He looks at Melinda. “Put the gun—”

“*What. Is. My. Name*.”

“Yes, tell her, Cesare,” Melinda spits. “Tell her *who she is*. Tell her how her—”

“Enough!” Dad barks. His gaze is haggard as he looks back to me. “Honey, it’s complicated—”

“It’s *really not*!!” I roar, shaking even as that sluggish feeling still creeps through my system. My eyes stab into him. “What’s my fucking *name*.”

It’s the way he stops frowning at me that tells me he knows.

…Knows that *I know*.

Knows the façade is cracking.

His head slowly shakes. “I…I never meant…” He pauses, and his face pales. “Honey—”

“Use. My. Fucking. NAME!”

“*LARK*!!!”

I wince, choking as the word slams into me. I already knew but hearing it from my own father’s lips is like being stabbed in the heart.

He knew I was his daughter.

He knew I was Dove's twin.

And yet he still let me live as “the housekeeper’s granddaughter”, as if I was a guest in his house.

“It’s LARK!” he roars at me. “There! That’s what you wanted to hear, isn’t it?! You seem to know anyway!” He whirls on Melinda. “There! Are you happy now?!”

“Not yet,” she chokes. “Tell her the rest.”

“*Fuck you*, you fucking bitch—!”

I scream when the shot explodes into the ceiling, bringing down plaster dust.

“*Tell her the rest!!*”

“Okay!!” my dad bellows. He turns to look at me, swallowing heavily. “I…” His eyes dart to Melinda. “This is *difficult*. If you could please give us some privacy—”

“Is privacy going to make it less difficult to tell her how you and that quack doctor have been keeping her medicated to within an inch of her life!? To keep her half-fucking-crazy?!”

It’s like ice over a lake cracking, splintering, spiderwebbing, and then shattering like glass, plunging you into the frozen darkness.

I’m going to be honest with you, I’m a little shocked by what you’re on, and especially the dosages.

The blood drains from my face, and my body goes numb.

I’m amazed you can even carry on a conversation, being on that much lithium.

My father’s face is *white* as I turn to him.

“*What did she just say*?”

“Don’t listen to her,” he says. “You’re *sick*, honey. You've got…stuff wrong in your head, and Dr. Caruso—”

“Stop talking.”

“Lark—”

“*STOP. FUCKING. TALKING.*”

The room goes pin-drop silent as a bitter, poisonous taste fills my mouth and trickles down into my very soul.

Like I’ve been hollowed out. Like everything good inside me has been removed, leaving me empty and dead.

I know what betrayal feels like. I know—*from this fucking man*—what it feels like to be forced into marriage as part of a business arrangement…and apparently, what it feels like to be lied to about who you are, and to have your very fucking identity hidden.

But this…

Holy shit.

Hearing that you've been kept in a prison of your own mind, held hostage by overmedication and the demons inside you that those very meds feed, is *horrifying*.

Of all the betrayals…this one cuts the deepest.

"Lark."

I don't even look at him when my father croaks my name.

"Lark, I'm so sorry."

"That's good, Cesare."

I blink, my body feeling slower, number.

Colder.

My gaze drifts sluggishly back to my coffee.

Whatever Melinda put in it, it's really starting to kick in.

"Say your apologies, Cesare," Melinda says quietly. "I have a way forward for us, my love."

Slowly, like my head weighs a thousand pounds, I twist to look at her. She's still got the gun trained on me as she looks right at my dad.

"I know why you could never be with me," she chokes, smiling at him as tears fill her eyes. "And I know how to fix it."

Her hand holding the gun trembles.

"You could never be with me because there were too many other distractions. Too many other women. Too many commitments *to* those other women."

She turns back to me.

"Commitments like her."

Oh my God.

She wraps her other hand around the grip of the pistol to steady it, a manic glint in her eyes as she looks right down the barrel of the gun at me.

“I can fix things for us, Cesare.”

“Melinda, *stop pointing that fucking gun at her!!*”

“I’m doing this for us—”

“Point it at me!” My dad staggers to his feet. His eyes shift to me, full of remorse. “Lark, honey, I’m sorry. I’m *so fucking sorry*. I was a shit father! I was a monster! I am so—”

“I can fix this, baby.”

“Point it at me, Mel!!” he screams. “Point it at me!!”

Melinda isn’t even hearing him.

Not seeing him.

Just looking at me down the barrel of her loaded gun.

She smiles. “This is for us, Cesare,” she says quietly. “I’m doing this for—”

I scream as the gun erupts in her hands. *Just* as she pulls the trigger, a shape lunges in front of me.

A shape that knocks me over across the couch and then groans, bleeding.

“*Please forgive me, Lark*.”

I watch the light flicker out in my father’s eyes.

Melinda drops the gun with a heavy thud.

“NO!!!”

She screams and falls to her knees, her face in her hands.

And I see my chance.

I lurch from under my dad’s body and stagger to the door. But when thunder roars out, and the wooden doorframe splinters right next to my head, I drop to my knees, raising my hands.

“*Please*!” I scream. “Please, Melinda! Melinda, I—”

I flinch when the warm metal of the gun presses between my shoulder blades.

“Get up, Lark,” Melinda whispers. “I’m not done with you yet.”

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43

BANE

SOMETHING IS VERY WRONG.

I know it the second I step inside the Marchetti mansion.

Not because I see or hear anything. But because I just *walked into* a mafia don’s Brooklyn mansion uninvited, and I’m not full of bullet holes.

The second I take another step inside and glance to my left, I understand why.

The two men whose job I’m sure it was to stop guys like me from just walking in are *themselves* full of bullet holes.

Fuck.

Blood is pooled around the bodies, and from the way it’s still leaking out, I can tell whoever did this isn’t that far away.

Whoever did this *probably has Dove*. And I’m guessing that's Melinda.

I hate that I missed this. I ran a check months ago on anyone in her life I couldn’t personally vouch for. The dancers at the Zakharova I didn’t already know. Chiara’s dipshit husband and all his mafia goons.

I skipped over the Marchetti’s housekeeper because I trusted that *the mob boss who owns the house* would have done that himself.

Turns out I had missed the bigger picture.

Sergey ran some intel for me as I was driving here from my dad's house: Melinda Wainwright is *not* a well woman.

She's got two prior assault charges—one from an ex-boyfriend, the other from a married guy she was having an affair with.

Both of those were dropped: the boyfriend's because he refused to testify after she allegedly ran into him with her car. And I'm guessing the married guy didn't want to do much about the fork she stabbed him with—five times—since doing that would have alerted his wife that he'd been sticking his dick in crazy.

She's also been in mental health facilities a few times—once voluntarily, twice involuntarily.

I glance down at the shot bodyguards at my feet. Maybe Cesare knew how nuts she was. Maybe that was part of the appeal in fucking her off and on for years, all the while hinting that she might be getting a mafia-level wedding ring at some point.

Regardless, I'd bet money that the explosion that took out the carriage house and almost incinerated the *current* Mrs. Marchetti was Melinda's work.

I do a sweep of the first floor, my gun in hand, my senses straining. The second I step into Cesare's home office—

Fuck.

Lark's father is dead, the gaping close-range gunshot wound to his chest still leaking blood all over the couch.

Looks like Melinda *definitely* isn't getting that wedding ring now. But that just makes her even more dangerous to Lark right now.

Because with Cesare dead, Melinda has nothing to lose.

I continue with my sweep. The bullet hole in the door to the office stops me, but it's the footprints in blood on the hardwood floor that have my full attention.

Two sets of footprints.

Lark’s alive. At least, she was recently.

I follow the footprints down the hall, through the library, and into the kitchen out back…

Right to the open door of the staircase that leads down to the garden apartment.

I leave my shoes upstairs and tiptoe down the dark staircase into Melinda’s apartment. The kitchen with the view out to the backyard is clear. So is the living room.

I hear water running.

I peer down the hall toward Lark’s old room, where the sound is coming from.

Every nerve jangles as I move silently down the hall and pause against the wall just outside her room. Then I spin, as if to sweep the room with my gun. When I do, my gaze stabs through the bedroom and the open door to the ensuite bathroom.

No.

Holy fucking mother of God NO.

Lark’s lying in the clawfoot bathtub, fully clothed, her eyes half-shut and rolled back, her arms draped over the sides of the tub which is filling with water.

She looks dead.

Fucking. *Dead*.

“LARK!!”

I ignore all reason, forget any sense of self-preservation.

All I see is the woman I love, lying dead in a bathtub, and I *explode*.

“LARK!!!”

I scream her name as I bolt into the bedroom. Instantly, a blade pierces into my back. I choke as searing pain stabs through me, blood spitting from my mouth as my legs give out.

The gun falls from my hand. The knife in my back twists, ripping a gurgled roar from my throat.

No.

I drop to my knees, choking, my mouth suddenly flooded with copper. I look down, shocked to see the sheer amount of blood pouring from my mouth and to the floor.

That's when my vision starts to dim.

I feel paralyzed, unable to even make the slightest attempt to catch myself as I topple over sideways.

A pair of feet approaches, and when I swivel my eyes I see Melinda standing over me.

"I'm sorry," she says in an eerily calm, logical tone. "I had to. I have to kill *her*, you see, and you would have stopped me."

I ignore her, my wild, blurring gaze stabbing past her to the tub.

To Lark, lying in the rapidly filling water, arms draped over the porcelain edges and head lolled to one side.

Her eyes swim aimlessly, like she's been drugged. I roar another gurgled sound, spewing blood across the floor as I try to push myself back up. But my hands slip on the blood, and my limbs have no strength in them anyway.

I crash back to the floor, tasting copper as my gaze lands on Lark.

I'm getting worse.

My vision blurs and narrows, until all I see is her.

Then I see nothing at all.

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DOVE

No.

Please.

No.

I can feel my eyes drifting all over the place, barely able to focus.

That is, until I see Bane stiffen and yell, and spit blood as he drops to his knees with that monster behind him.

I want to scream. Or cry. Or tell him I love him. But my voice isn't working, just like the rest of my body from whatever Melinda put in that coffee.

All I can do is lie in the tepid water as the tub fills around me, screaming silently in my head as I watch the man I love fall to the side, his face chalky.

Blood pours and gurgles from his mouth. More pools around his body.

Oh God, there's so much of it.

All I can do is stare in horror and pain, tears falling from my eyes as I watch Bane sink to the floor with a kitchen knife still lodged in his back.

"I had to!" Melinda mumbles, but not at me. She's talking to herself again, like she was when she forced me down here, and made me turn the water in the tub on, and climb in.

“He would have stopped me,” she mutters, shaking her head. Her movements are erratic and twitchy: her gaze rips to me, then the ceiling, then her hands, then lastly to Bane, lying on the floor.

“He was going to try to stop me,” she blurts.

Tears flow down my numb cheeks as she suddenly whirls to look right at me.

“He was going to stop me, Lark!” she screams at me. “He can’t do that!” She shakes her head violently back and forth. “He can’t!”

She looks at her hands, and suddenly, she’s bolting from the room.

For a second, I wonder if she’s just snapped and decided to make a run for it. But then she’s back, brandishing another gleaming kitchen knife.

She discarded the gun upstairs, after emptying it into the two Marchetti guards who came running at the sound of her first two shots. But the knife in her hand looks plenty lethal as she steps past Bane and storms over to me.

I can’t move at all. I’m frozen in my non-responsive body, staring in horror as she looks down at me.

“I have to, you see,” she says quietly. “It’s why Cesare and I can never be together. There’s too many other women—you and Chiara included. It blocks the auras between him and me.” She smiles sadly at me. “I always liked you, Lark,” she says, her voice even and emotionless. “Even if no one else knew, when you came back and they told everyone that you were Dove…” She taps the side of her head with the flat edge of the knife. “*I* knew. So I’m sorry.”

She drops to her knees next to me. The tub is still filling with water, and I watch in paralyzed dread as she lifts my limp arm and pushes the sleeve of my sweatshirt up past my elbow.

“I’ll do it how you would want,” she says with a smile on her face. “Nothing messy.” Her smiling face raises to mine. “You deserve to look pretty for your funeral, darling.”

No.

No, God, no.

Let me move.

Let me fight for my life.

But as hard as I try, all I can do is make my hand twitch a little.

Melinda notices the twitch and shakes her head. “No, don’t worry. It won’t even hurt! The paralyzing agent takes that away, too.” A slight shadow crosses her face when she looks into my tearful eyes. “Oh, don’t cry, Lark. I know you’re sad about your father. But once I remove all the other women, he’ll be okay. He’s going to be fine, you'll see! And we’ll finally be together! The fight we had in my room the other day…he was so mad! But it will all be okay now!”

I want to scream that killing me won’t bring back my dad, who I *know* is dead upstairs because *she shot him*.

But I can’t.

That doesn’t stop me from trying, though.

My muscles strain, my mind screaming for *anything*. My fingers twitch. My shoulder spasms.

It’s not enough.

My eyes land on Bane. He’s still breathing, but I can tell he's fading in and out as his eyes stay locked on me. I focus my hazy, blurry gaze on him, screaming silently for him to see that I see him.

That I love him.

I grit my teeth, forcing strength I don’t have into my muscles. I can feel my hand and shoulder twitch again.

Still not enough.

I recoil inwardly when Melinda sits on a little stool next to the tub and pats my bare arm where she’s pushed up my sweatshirt, then turns it until my

wrist is facing up.

“This won’t hurt, honey,” she says quietly.

No.

No!

Melinda holds up the kitchen knife and smiles at me.

“You wrote in your diary once about this. I hope it's everything you wanted.”

NO!!!

Hot tears flood my face as she brings the razor-sharp tip of the knife to my wrist. The metal brushes my skin, and I watch my vein jump beneath it.

Please, don’t.

I don’t want to die.

I'm too happy.

Anguish wrenches through me as I watch, helpless to look away, as Melinda pushes the tip of the knife into my wrist. Blood wells and then seeps out, running in bright crimson rivers over my skin. She calmly slices up toward the elbow, cutting the vein and opening it wide.

I look like a statue on the outside. Inside, I’m screaming.

Crying.

Yelling that I love him.

Cursing her.

Wanting to save us both, but unable to do so.

Melinda cuts a few inches up my arm before she pulls the knife away. Blood *pours* from the wound, so much and so fast it takes my fucking breath away.

“There,” Melinda sighs happily. She stands from the stool and looks down at me, holding the knife in her hand. “Just go to sleep, honey,” she says with a smile. She sets the knife down on the stool and turns to Bane.

“Your turn, handsome.”

Every synapse in my brain fires. Every nerve sparks. My eyes are locked right on him, watching the man I love lying bleeding out on the floor while I’m powerless to help him.

That is *not.*

Fucking.

Happening.

Move.

MOVE.

My fingers twitch again. Then my hand. I reach into the void inside me, pulling every ounce of energy left *anywhere* in my body and slamming it all into my arm.

Move, goddammit. MOVE!

My shoulder lifts. My elbow twitches. Blood pours from my arm as I drag it across the edge of the tub, smearing red everywhere.

My fingers curl around the handle of the knife.

I look past Melinda, her back to me, at Bane. His eyes swim briefly, then they focus on me.

I love you, I silently tell him.

I’ve always loved you.

I’m only going to get one shot at this.

Better make it count.

MOVE!

By some fucking miracle, my arm *obeys*, lifting the knife in my fist.

Melinda must hear it, because she starts to turn to look at me.

Too late, bitch.

I plunge the knife into her side, just above her hip. She staggers and whirls toward me, pulling her body away from the blade and freeing herself.

So I stab her again.

And again.

And again.

My face is a mask, devoid of the screaming rage behind it as I slam the knife into her stomach, her hips, her thighs. Blood explodes from her leg, and I know I've hit her aorta.

I also know I've got nothing left.

My eyes flutter shut.

The blade clatters to the floor just as Melinda hits the tiles with a shriek and a thud. She keeps screaming, flailing for help.

I manage to open my eyes for just one more second.

I don't waste it on her. I look at him.

He looks back.

Melinda stops kicking and goes still.

I'm going to bleed out soon. *I'm going to die.*

So I look at him and remind myself how lucky I was that I got to fall in love with him.

Twice.

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BANE

Get up.

Get the fuck UP, motherfucker.

Fire flickers to life somewhere inside the darkness I'm drowning in.

GET. UP!

My eyes snap open. I choke, pain exploding through my back and my side.

Blood covers my front and pools stickily around me. I shift, then cry out as fresh pain lances through my back.

I think maybe I've been stabbed.

It's not the first time. I was also stabbed in a dumb bar fight at Knightsblood University, when Nero said something psychotic to some guy, and the guy's buddies tried to throw down.

But the knife in question was a fucking *pocketknife*, and it barely got me.

Something tells me this is much worse.

My vision starts to sharpen. I wince, looking past my blood on the floor, past the gun I dropped…

Melinda lies clearly dead on the ground, a knife sticking out of her blood-soaked thigh and a *lot* of blood spreading across the tiles around her.

Lark must have gotten her aorta.

Good girl.

Wait.

LARK.

My gaze drifts higher, and I groan when I see her lying in the tub.

Motionless. Pale.

So fucking pale.

Then I see her arm and a roar thunders from my throat.

GET. THE FUCK. UP.

I need to get up. I need to get to her.

She’s dying.

Blood flows like Christmas ribbons from the gash on her wrist. The tub faucet is still on, and red-tinged water spills over the side onto the floor, mixing with Lark's and Melinda’s blood. turning the whole room red.

Move, motherfucker, or she fucking dies.

It takes everything I have, but I get one knee on the ground.

Then the other.

My legs feel weak as fuck. No way can I stand.

But I can damn well crawl.

I groan, pain taking my breath away and making my vision cut in and out. I keep moving, shuffling forward on hands and knees until I’m past the hardwood of the bedroom and onto the bloodied, wet bathroom tiles.

“*Stay with me, baby!*” I grunt through the agony wrapping like a noose around my throat. “*Fucking stay with me*!”

I’m having a lot of trouble filling my lungs, and I don’t think it’s just the pain. But I don’t have time to worry about that right now.

Blood soaks my clothes as I drag myself through the horror-show scene, past Melinda's body, past the knife on the floor.

"LARK!" I roar, reaching for the edge of the tub and choking as white-hot lighting explodes through my shoulder.

I keep pulling, screaming through the agony as I lift myself up until I can get one knee to the edge.

I grunt and flip over the edge of the tub, splashing into the blood-red water with Lark. She doesn't move.

"STAY WITH ME, BABY!!"

I shove myself behind her, between her and the tub. The knife is still in my back: I'm made aware of that when it bangs against the porcelain.

I think I black out for a second then.

But I come to again, sputtering, fresh blood dripping from my mouth as I blink away the agony and wrap my arms around her.

"Stay with me, baby," I choke as I reach over the side of the tub and grab a fistful of Melinda's blouse. With a grunt and a yank, I tear off a big strip of it and then lift Lark's arm out of the water.

Fucking God, there's *so much blood.*

My vision starts to blur again as I wrap the makeshift bandage around Lark's wound. I tie it as tightly as I can, then lift her arm above the level of her heart and keep it there.

"C'mon, baby!" I choke, the taste of copper filling my mouth. I wheeze as I try to suck in air.

"*C'mon, Lark*!" I rasp, slapping her cheek with my other hand. "COME ON!"

Her lips are purple, and her face is turning fucking blue.

Rage sparks inside me as I grab her chin and shake her violently, then drop my mouth to her cold ear.

“*You don’t get to fucking die, Lark*,” I hiss. “You and I made a deal. You go, I go. And *I can’t fucking go yet*.” Hot tears burn my eyes. “I can’t fucking go yet,” I whisper into her ear, my head pressed to hers, “because I need to tell you I love you *one more fucking time*.”

I wheeze in a ragged breath as I slap her cheek again.

“So don’t fucking die, baby,” I croak, slapping her again. “*Don’t you dare—*”

Her eyes flicker behind her closed lids.

Her blue lips part a fraction of an inch, then close again.

I gasp for air, shoving her arm up higher.

“*Stay with me*,” I mumble. “*You’re too happy to jump, remember*?”

Then I fade away.

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DOVE

Is this is what death feels like?

Not the act of *dying*. I think I might be past that point.

I don’t feel any pain. Can’t feel the blood flowing from my arm anymore.

It feels like I’m floating in a warm bath. And there’s an arm around me.

Holding me.

Loving me.

I smile, sinking back, letting the heat warm me.

The light shines a little brighter, calling me.

Maybe this is what you feel right before the end, after falling eighty-three floors: just…peace.

Warmth, light, love, and *peace*.

If this is the end, maybe it’s not so bad.

My eyes flutter, and suddenly, the bright light goes away as my vision clears.

I don’t understand.

I’m in the bathtub, but why am I wearing clothes? And why can’t I move?

Panic sinks in, but then my eyes land on the arm around me, and the hand splayed across my middle.

I know those tattoos.

"*Bane…*"

My vision fades out again, then comes back.

"*Bane? Are you there?*"

Somehow, I drag my hand to his. I tap my fingers weakly against his skin.

"Bane, it's me…"

That comforting sensation of warmth and light keeps coming and going, like a tide washing against a faraway shore. I force my fingers to slide over his hand, to the pulse point at his wrist.

I don't feel one.

And suddenly, I'm awake.

"*Bane*!" I cry out, my head lolling to one side against his body. "Bane, wake…wake *up*…"

My eyes fall shut.

"*Don't go*," I whisper. "*Not without me*."

A tear slides down my cheek. He's not moving at all.

"*Please don't leave me.*"

"Shhh, I'm right here, baby," a voice croons softly from the darkness.

"Help is coming, Lark. Stay with me, baby. Stay with me."

It's not Bane.

It's a woman's voice, and a woman's soft hands that are holding me to her chest and stroking my hair.

"*Stay with me, baby*."

“*Stay with me. Mommy’s here.*”

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47

LYDIA

Twenty-four years ago:

RAIN LASHES DOWN IN SHEETS, bolts of lightning splitting the sky as thunder booms like an angry god.

“There! There! I see them!”

Agatha’s voice barely carries over the roar of the storm about to slam into the beach. I follow where she's pointing, clutching the tiny bundle to my chest.

Thank fucking God.

A little way down the shore, a black rubber dinghy surges out of the surf and up onto the wet sand. Two men jump out and start to run toward us. I look at Agatha, then at the little bundle in her arms that matches the one in mine.

So new, and already on the run, like me.

I never wanted this for them, just as I didn't want the life I was thrust into, with a man who thinks of me as property and the babies he’ll never meet as bargaining chips.

Well, he’ll never get his hands on them. And he’ll never touch me again.

It doesn’t matter that I’ve made a deal with another devil to get away from the one I’m married to.

Better the devil you know, isn't that the saying?

They’re wrong. Because the devil *I know* will probably kill me if I stay. He’ll definitely kill me if he finds me before I’ve made it to where we need to go. But staying will just delay the inevitable.

That’s what’s brought me here, to the rocky Maine coast in the dead of night, with two little girls that monster will never have.

He only knows about the one, anyway. I’ve kept so much of my life from him, including the details of my pregnancy. Details like the fact that my body decided to release *two* eggs that night he took what I’d kept from him for so long.

But none of that matters now.

All that matters is getting them away from him, forever.

“Come on, Lydia!” Agatha calls out over the wind as we start to run toward the approaching men.

I’d be truly lost without her.

She’s been like a mother to me these last few years, and the only reason I’ve had the courage to do this. It's even better that she’s coming with us.

We’re going to start a new life, the four of us. I don’t know where yet, or when, because it’s going to involve hiding for a while to stay off my husband’s radar.

But the Obsidian Syndicate has resources, and The Marquis has promised to take us in, for a very fair price, too. One I’m *more* than willing to pay.

He wants my husband’s secrets, so he can bring him under heel.

I want to run away from that husband.

It's so simple and elegant: I tell him everything I know about the inner workings of the Marchetti family, and he gives Agatha, the girls and I safe passage, shelter, and new lives.

I wince a little as I glance at Agatha, jogging beside me along the furious beach. She doesn't know what's about to happen: that I'm about to make the single hardest choice of my life, a choice no mother should have to make.

But I have to, for little Lark and Dove.

You can't put all your eggs in one basket.

"Lydia Marchetti?!" one of the men in black wetsuits, like a SEAL team, says, flashing a light in our faces.

"Bancroft!" I scream over the wind, squinting into the glare. "Lydia Bancroft."

I'm done with the name that was forced upon me. I'm going back to the one I was given at birth.

He nods, then shines his light on Dove in my arms, then at Lark, bundled up against Agatha.

"Boat's moored just off the breakers," he barks, turning and pointing into the black surf. "Which two of you are coming?"

Agatha's face crumples.

I'm so sorry.

"Wait!" she screams over the roaring thunder. "There's been a mistake! The agreement was for all four—"

"This is safer!" I yell. "You *know* he's looking for us! If we're all together—"

"No!" she cries out, shaking her head madly. "No, God, *no*! Lydia!"

"I need you to promise me something!" I scream. "Keep her safe from him! *Whatever it takes*, Agatha!!"

The wind howls, the rain lashing my face mixing with my tears.

"Lydia—!"

“Just keep her safe!!!”

I choke out a sob as I hurl myself at her, hugging her with one arm before I lean down and press my lips to the little bundle at her chest.

I’ll see you soon, Lark.

I swear it.

I'm truly sorry we can’t all go together.

“*I love you*,” I choke against my infant daughter. Then I pull away.

“Keep her away from him!” I sob again, tears streaming down my face as I hold Dove to my chest. “Promise me, Agatha!!”

She's sobbing as she nods, hugging Lark close to her body.

I swallow and turn to the two men. “Take them! *Go*!”

I stand with Dove in my arms on the black, moonless beach, the wrath of a furious god crashing around us, watching as half of my heart motors away into the night.

I *will* see them again.

I’ve arranged for two separate escapes. Agatha will take Lark and meet the Obsidian Syndicate’s people in Canada. Dove and I are being driven through the night to Chicago. Eventually, the four of us will meet up in London and start new lives.

Dove starts to cry as I run back up the beach, my breath ragged as I battle the roaring wind. I pause for a moment at the cabin where my daughters were born barely three weeks ago. A tight smile pulls at my lips.

We’re getting out, my darlings.

We’re starting over.

I lean into the wind, clutching Dove tighter as I rush up the gravel driveway to the main road.

Please be here.

Please don’t be late.

I round the last corner past the dunes, and when lighting splits the sky, I see the SUV waiting for us. The driver flashes his headlights when he sees me, and my heart surges.

“It’s okay, baby girl,” I coo into the top of Dove’s head. “We’re safe now. We’re going away. I can’t wait to show you the world.”

The back door swings open.

“Right on time!” I smile. “I’m so glad you—”

No.

This can’t be happening.

“*Hello, Lydia*.”

My husband stares blankly at me from the back seat.

“Is that my daughter? Is that our Dove?”

I shake my head, my heart thudding even louder than the storm against my chest. “No,” I choke. “She’s not yours. She’ll *never* be—”

I scream, flinching and turning away to shield my baby from the gun he’s just pulled out.

“Lydia!” he barks. “Give her to me. Now!”

I shake my head, sobbing into the wind and holding her close.

“Never!”

The gun clicks behind me.

“Give me my fucking daughter or I’ll leave you both to bleed out on the side of the road.”

My heart breaks as the thunder booms.

“You have five seconds. Five. Four. Three—”

“Okay!!”

I’m sobbing as I turn, clinging tightly to Dove as she starts to wail. It feels like an outside force is controlling my body as I find myself handing my heart to the man I hate.

“Be careful with her!” I choke, crying freely as Cesare takes her under one arm. He smiles down at her, his eyes glinting coldly.

“Fine!” I blurt, the wind and the rain whipping at my face as I reach for the door. “You win, you bastard! You can take me home and do whatever you like, just don’t you *dare* hurt—”

“Oh, my dear, that’s not how this is going to happen.” His eyes narrow at me as he raises the gun in his other hand. “Say goodbye to your daughter, Lydia.”

The gun fires.

My body folds in half as the scream and my breath are forced from my throat.

I stagger back, clutching my stomach, feeling hot, sticky liquid pour through my fingers.

I drop to my knees.

The car door shuts.

I fall into the mud and the rain as the SUV roars away.

No.

This isn’t how this is supposed to go.

I’ll come back for you, Dove.

Mommy will come back for you.

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DOVE

My Dearest Lark,

If you're reading this, I've passed on.

Don't be sad. I've lived a long, happy life, which was only made even more wonderful by spending the past sixteen years raising you. And tonight, on the eve of your sixteenth birthday, I find myself ready to tell you some truths about yourself and your past that I've kept from you.

I had good reasons to do so, one of them being that someone very close to me asked me to. Another is that I wanted to keep you safe from things I never wanted you to worry about.

I don't expect you'll read this for some time. I don't plan on shuffling off this mortal coil quite yet! But I've had some memory issues lately. I'm hoping it's just yet another of the indignities that comes with getting older, but in case it DOES get worse, this needs to be committed to paper now.

You deserve to know the truth about who you are, and where you came from.

How I wish I could do this face to face. It feels like you're owed that, especially as you grow into such a fine young woman. But I'm afraid the lives we live are still too dangerous for speaking this out loud.

Which brings me to another note: if you're reading this, it also means your father has passed.

I spent a long time thinking about writing this letter, and was at a loss how I could ensure it stayed hidden until such time when you were no longer in danger. I've come up with a plan.

This letter will go into a safety deposit box, paid through the next forty years.

Your father has recently been having me help him update his living will, including dictating terms for me to type. He's quite slow on a keyboard.

Since, I am sad to say, the danger comes exclusively from your father, tomorrow, I'll be adding one final note to that living will before I mail it to his lawyers: that upon his death, the safety deposit box I mentioned above will be opened, and this letter will eventually find its way to you.

I'm sure that doesn't make sense yet, but it will in a moment.

I'm also afraid I'm rambling, so I'll get to the point. If you're not already, I would suggest you sit down.

Your life is not what you've been told it is.

Your parents are not the people you've heard about in my vague, flowery stories. Your father was not Sean Laramie. He was never in the Marines, and he didn't die in Kabul before you were born. Your mother was not Michelle Peltier, and she didn't die giving birth to you.

Sean and Michelle were never real people. Your background is a lie you were told, again and again, to keep you safe.

Your actual father is Cesare Marchetti. And by extension, Dove, whom you've grown up alongside as if you were sisters, IS in fact, your sister.

Your fraternal twin, actually.

As to your real mother, well, the stories I told you about Michelle are all true, except they're actually about a wonderful, loving woman named Lydia.

Your father shot her three weeks after you and Dove were born.

Your mother's maiden name was Lydia Bancroft. I don't know much about her background, because she rarely spoke of it. But I do know that you have an uncle somewhere, and I believe two male cousins.

Your grandfather, Quentin Bancroft, was a dangerous man. On the eve of your mother's eighteenth birthday, he married her off to your father as part of a business arrangement. That's when we met, and I protected her as best as I could.

She was pregnant within six months of the wedding, but when she found out she was having twins, she didn't tell your father. She may have hated him, *but the second she heard both your little heartbeats, you were her true loves. And so two weeks before her due date, in an effort to keep you from your father, she ran.*

She told your father she was going to a prenatal specialist in Boston. Once she was there, she skipped out on the guards he'd sent.

Meanwhile, I told your father I was going to visit my non-existent daughter, Michelle, for the birth of my granddaughter. Instead went to Boston and met up with Lydia.

Three weeks later, you and Dove came into the world, in a quiet seaside cabin in Boothbay, Maine.

Your mother knew your father wouldn't rest until he got his hands on you both. So she made contact with an organization called the Obsidian Syndicate, to which your grandfather had connections. Bluntly, she offered the leader of this organization dirt on your father in exchange for his help getting the four of us new lives.

Unfortunately, on the night we left to go start those new lives, something went terribly wrong. Your mother sent you and I off with one escort from the Syndicate, while she and your sister went to go meet with a second escort to take them a different way.

Instead of her escort, it was your father waiting for her. He shot her in the stomach, took your sister, and left your mother to die in the rain. I'll never forget how rainy that night was.

But don't worry, my Lark. This story doesn't end there.

Your mother didn’t die that night. She was close, but she was found by the Syndicate men who were there to bring her and Dove to safety.

Regardless, all I heard was that she’d been killed, and Dove had been stolen back by your father. I had a choice to make: keep running with you and pray that the Syndicate upheld their end of the bargain out of charity, since they were no longer getting the dirt on your father. Or I could go back and watch over your sister the same way I had watched over your mother.

Well, you know which choice I made.

I went back to New York, your father none the wiser that I’d helped his wife escape from his clutches. I explained you and the frequent tears in my eyes with a cockamamie story that my daughter, Michelle, had died giving birth to you. I suppose that’s where your father, unoriginal thief that he is, got the idea to tell first me and then Dove the same story about Lydia.

I told myself that it wasn't that dangerous for you to be in the same house as that monster because he didn’t know you existed. And you got to be there, under his very nose, growing up under the same roof as your sister. I thought your mother would be happy about that.

Then, a year after the night I thought she died, your mother contacted me.

She’d been taken in by the Syndicate, who saved her from death. They even helped her learn to walk again, as your father’s bullet had paralyzed her from the waist down.

I wanted to run again, taking both of you with me, but your mother told me it was too dangerous. Cesare was sharper now and had eyes on Dove constantly.

So we didn’t run. We stayed, so I could watch over you both under one roof, which is what I’ve done for the last sixteen years.

You haven’t seen your mother since that night on the beach in Maine. But she’s watched you grow up from a distance. Through photographs, and drawings and schoolwork of yours that I’ve sent her when I can.

Your mother loves you, Lark, as she loves your sister. She loved you so much she was willing to sacrifice her own life to keep you safe. That hasn’t

changed.

My hope is that by the time you get this letter, you'll already know all of this. It will mean Cesare is dead, which hopefully means your mother has left the shadows to embrace you and your sister in the light.

But nothing in life is certain. So that's why I've written all of this down for you.

So that you know who you are, where and who you come from, and that you are and have always been loved more than life itself.

I realize as I come to the end of this that I have rather "outed" myself as not really being your grandmother. But it's my hope that you'll forgive my lies and half-truths and continue to think of me as that anyway.

My biggest regret in life is not telling you this to your face, but here it is: the best thing that ever happened to me was watching you and your sister grow into the beautiful young women that you've become.

I love you so much, Lark. I hope you find all the happiness in life you deserve.

Love always,

Grandma

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DOVE

THE LAST WEEKS don’t seem real. They can’t be.

And yet, here I am.

Reunited.

With my *mother*.

I’ve probably asked her a million questions since the day she saved my life, and Bane’s. About who she was before my father. About her decision to run to keep Dove and me from him. About the night he shot her and left her to die in the mud.

Lucky for me, she’s been waiting twenty-four years to *answer them*.

Mom should have died that night. But she didn’t. Instead, the Obsidian Syndicate agents who were supposed to whisk her and Dove away found her, after being delayed by a downed telephone pole across the road leading to the cabin..

They didn’t think she’d last the night, but she did, because she’s a *badass*.

She spent the next year in a wheelchair, and then killing herself in physical therapy to learn how to walk again.

But the real battle came after, when she spent the next seventeen years watching Dove and I grow up from a distance, living with the heartache of

not being able to hug us, or brush our hair, or tell us that she was alive, and loved us.

But that's what she did for *seventeen* fucking years, taking comfort in the fact that we were safe and cared for.

While *biding her time*.

That was the hardest part of our reunion: hearing about the night she tried to take us back, only to see it all turn to ash in her hands.

It turns out that Mom had another friend and ally aside from Agatha in our father’s house, when she was a scared young bride.

A quiet and somewhat reserved but kind young man. He’d bring her little gifts to cheer her up and run subtle interference to keep my dad away from her when he could. He sympathized with her situation and became her friend and ally.

So much so that when Dove and I were seventeen, even though this man was no longer working for our father, Mom contacted him to help her take us back.

Ironically, her plan was a fake kidnapping. She planned to send Cesare a bogus ransom note to keep him running around, and in the meantime whisk us away to the Syndicate.

It wasn't her plan that went wrong.

It was that the man she thought of as her friend, who’d once been a driver for our father, turned out to be a literal psychopath and serial killer.

Her ally was Lorenzo Cielo, and my mother has never forgiven herself for not seeing him for who he really was.

“Lark?”

I blink as I turn to the woman who brought me into the world in a tiny beach-side cabin in Maine. Dark thoughts can wait. They have no place here, when I look into my mother’s eyes and feel the warmth of her smile.

”Yeah, Mom?”

She laughs in a way that brings a huge smile to my face.

“I was just saying I still can’t believe I’m about to have both of you standing in front of me.”

I smile back, seeing the look of glee on her face.

“Any minute now,” I wink, reaching out to squeeze her hand. “I’m going to grab a coffee. You want one?”

I feel her grip on my hand tighten.

“It’s just over there, Mom,” I murmur, turning to point across the lounge of the private airfield.

She blushes. “Sorry,” she murmurs. “I’m just…”

Scared to see me even leave the room.

It's okay, I get it.

She lost me for so many years.

“You want him to come with me to keep me safe at Starbucks?” I grin at her as I lean into Bane, who’s sitting on the other side of me.

“Har har,” Mom sighs.

“How about *I* go get the coffees, and you two stay right here,” Bane growls.

“I like this plan,” Mom says, quickly nodding. “Much better.” She winks at me. “Damn, I like him.”

I grin as I turn toward Bane, lean in, and kiss him.

“I like him too. Can you please get me a black coffee?”

“And I’ll take anything with so much sugar it's more dessert than coffee,” mom pipes up as Bane stands.

“Coming right up, ladies.”

When he’s gone, I glance back at my mother.

“I talked to Val yesterday,” I say.

Her eyes dart to mine, a hint of worry in them.

She’s fearless, my mom. I’ve learned that pretty fast. But there's one thing that gets her worried, other than me leaving her side: anything to do with family.

She knew that she had a brother that she’d lost contact with. She also knew that brother had a couple of sons. But she’s only just found out that those sons are Val, my friend from ballet, and *Vaughn.*

That’s a part of her past I still don’t know, and I’m not sure I will ever get out of her: who my grandfather was, and what his connection was to the Obsidian Syndicate—who *Mom’s nephew Vaughn* now runs.

There’s way more to her relationship with that organization than she’s telling me, I'm sure of it.

“Oh?” Mom says, trying to keep her voice neutral.

“You two don’t have to have a relationship, you know,” I say. “It’s not something he’s pushing for. I think he’s just curious. I mean, I told you he grew up in foster care. He barely remembers your brother. So… You being around is kind of a novelty to him, I think.”

She smiles a little, nodding. “I… I’m not entirely opposed to meeting him.”

“Val's a *really* great guy, Mom. I think you’d like him. *Great* hugger.”

She laughs. “Well, in *that* case,” she grins. Then her brow furrows. “And his brother?”

“I, uh…don’t get the impression that Vaughn is much of a hugger," I laugh. "But honestly, I don’t know him very well at all.”

Maybe that’ll change, now that he’s my cousin.

Or not.

We'll see.

“How about, when you're ready, we'll start with Val,” I say gently. “He’s fun, and *very* charming. You’ll love him.” I shrug. “We can wait on Vaughn. I don’t think he’s that invested either way.”

Mom nods. Just then, Bane walks back over with our coffees, and right after *that*, we hear the announcement that the plane is about to land.

It’s almost time.

I feel my heart quicken, rattling in my chest. I bring the coffee to my lips, then realize I’m so jittery that I have *zero* need for caffeine right now.

Bane laughs when I toss the cup into a trashcan as we walk past.

“I’m too nervous!” I squeak as I turn to him.

He smiles, pulling me close and cupping my face. “I know you are, baby. But it’s going to be fine. I bet she’s just as freaked out.”

I bet she is.

I mean, it’s been over seven years since we saw each other.

As it turns out, the story of Lorenzo Cielo taking Dove and I didn't actually end the way I thought it did.

I know now why my DNA was found on the handle of a knife that was used to cut Lorenzo’s throat.

It’s because that DNA belonged to *my mother*.

For all intents and purposes, Lydia Marchetti, *née* Bancroft, is dead. And we’re going to keep it that way. But I’ve talked to Taylor and Fumi and given them enough information…in confidence, of course…that they’ll be challenging the DNA findings.

They’ve assured me it's too different from my own DNA and more to the point too *similar* to the DNA of a woman who's been dead for twenty-four years for any judge in the country to admit it as evidence.

And without it, the Cielo family’s crusade against me falls apart.

Mom finally told me the full story of that night.

When Lorenzo never showed up at the rendezvous with us, Mom started looking for him. She even tried to contact Agatha. But she was so deep into her Alzheimer’s by then that she didn’t even know who Mom was.

But eventually, Mom tracked Lorenzo down. The next night, she found him at his horror-house on Staten Island…

…With her *daughters* chained up in separate bedrooms, their heads shaved.

She's the one who cut that monster's throat before Antonio and his men came in, guns blazing.

I take a deep breath as the airport's PA system announces that the plane we've been waiting for is now de-boarding.

She's almost here.

It's almost time.

You see, mom did kill Lorenzo that night. But she also did something else.

…She got one of us out.

She only had time for one. By the time she found Dove chained up with a shaved head, her ex-husband's men were already smashing in the front door, shooting everywhere, and accidentally setting the place on fire in the process.

So Mom made a gut-wrenching, split-second decision for the second time in her life.

"*I see her*!" Mom chokes, grabbing my arm in an iron grip. "*I SEE HER*!"

Mom had to choose that night: leave quickly with the princess, or keep looking for the housekeeper's granddaughter?

One would be easy to snatch another time.

The other would never be let out of the house again.

So she made her choice: she grabbed Dove, escaped out the window, and told herself she'd come get me within the next day.

But by then, I'd been hit on the head, told I was Dove, and *believed it*.

And *I* became the inaccessible princess that night: the mafia don's daughter who was now under permanent guard, doubly so after what had happened at

Lorenzo's hands.

When the coroner found remains in the room next to mine—remains of the girl I'd heard being brutally raped and ultimately killed—they were un-identifiable, due to the sheer heat of the chemical fire. But based on my testimony, those remains were declared to be those of Lark Peltier.

Except my sister wasn't *in* the room next to me. There was a room between the two of us, and in that room was a girl named Ellen Foster—the Barber's final victim.

After Mom told me this, I looked into her. Ellen only has one family member left: a sister who's a single mom who lives in Albany.

Four days ago, I wired ten million dollars to that sister's bank account in Ellen's honor, with the transfer being attributed to "Agatha Peltier".

The concourse doors open.

My mother grabs my hand. On my other side, Bane grabs the other one.

And suddenly, I'm seeing her again.

The best friend who was my sister.

The girl who died, who actually lived.

"*Lark—*"

"*Dove—*"

There's a frozen second where we just stare at each other.

There'll be time later to talk about what she's been doing for the last seven years. All I know, from talking to Mom, is that it involved the Obsidian Syndicate.

Or to figure out the whole name thing, because I'm genuinely not sure how to process the concept of thinking of myself as "Lark", when I've *been* "Dove" for the last seven years of my life.

But those and the ten million other questions I have can wait.

Right now, there's only one thing I need to say.

"*I missed you*," I choke, sobbing as my sister crashes into my arms.

She's crying. Mom is crying as she hugs us both fiercely. Bane is grinning like mad as he hugs all three of us, kissing the top of my head as pure love and joy and happiness thunder through my veins.

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EPILOGUE

DOVE

One month later:

NEW YORK IS beautiful when it wants to be.

From up here, you can almost pretend…

Well, whatever you like. Because eighty-three stories above the glittering city, anything is possible.

A last resort can be a new beginning. The past can turn into whatever future you make it.

My bare toes curl against the concrete as I look out over the sea of twinkling lights stretched out in front of me. But this time, I'm not up on the ledge. I'm standing *well* behind it, thank you very much, just enjoying the view.

Bane holds my hand as he stands barefoot next to me, looking out over this city of wonder and pain, of dreams and heartache.

"That promise still stands."

"What promise is that?" I ask.

Bane nods his chin at the ledge in front of us, and the abyss below.

“If you go—”

“I’m not going anywhere.” My hand squeezes his. “Ever. You?”

He shakes his head, then turns to smile at me. “Only if you do, baby.”

“Well, that’s settled then. Neither of us goes.”

He nods. “I think that’s the best outcome.”

“For sure. I mean, think of the *mess*.”

He snorts. “Stop it. You know your dark humor always gets me hard.”

I blush, grinning as I slide against his muscled body, gripping his shirt in my hands. “Guess you’ll just have to fuck me up here, then.”

He smiles hungrily. “That *is* a given.”

I giggle and slap his chest. “Oh, *is it*?”

“Very much so,” he growls, his eyes locking with mine. “But before that, I was hoping to do something else.”

I cock a brow, shivering against him as a cold wind blows over us.

“What exactly might that be?”

“Asking you to marry me.”

My heart jumps as he drops to his knee and holds a ring up. But then a puzzled smile creeps over my face, and my brow arches.

“You do remember that we’re already married, right?”

He rolls his eyes. “Yeah, I was there, in case you forgot.”

I smirk. “I've forgotten a lot of things in my life, but not that.”

He sighs heavily. “Can you just please shut up for a second.”

I grin and mime a zipping motion across my lips.

“I’m asking you,” Bane murmurs, “because I really *didn’t* last time. I *told* you.”

“Well, it seems to have worked anyway,” I giggle. Then I look at him fully, my heart thudding in my chest. “Wait, you’re really asking?”

“I’m really asking.”

My skin tingles as he stands and pulls me against him.

“Well?”

“I’ll think about it.”

He groans, rolling his eyes again as I cackle. Then I grab his face, rise up on my tiptoes, and sear my lips to his.

“*It’s yes, obviously*,” I murmur, kissing him.

“I was pretty sure,” he growls back. “I just wanted to hear you say it.”

“Well, in that case, *yes*,” I whisper into his mouth. “*Yes yes yes yes...*”

I only stop talking because he gives my lips something else to do.

The wind howls around us as we cling to each other, eighty-three stories above the city, on a roof we’ll be *walking* down from.

In rehab, they tell you that you’re *always* going to be addict. The trick is to be one who chooses *not* to use.

I realize now that that’s what life is, too. Even when it’s hard, and messy, and brutal, you just get up and keep on living.

So that’s what I’m going to do.

I’m going to get up, I’m going to keep on living, and I’m going to do it with him at my side.

* * *

The Darkest Dance series continues with Vaughn and Evelina’s story in *Dance of Monsters*.

Haven’t gotten enough of Bane and Dove?
Get their extra scene here, or type this link into your browser:
https://BookHip.com/QZNMVRL

This isn’t an epilogue or continuation to *Dance of Thorns.* But this extra hot “follow-up” story is guaranteed to keep the spice going.

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DANCE OF DECEPTION

Thank you so much for reading *Dance of Thorns*! If you enjoyed the book, I'd be incredibly grateful if you could leave a review and spread the word!

As mentioned, the Darkest Dance series continues with Evelina and Vaughn's story in *Dance of Monsters*, a dark mafia romance.

If you'd like to catch up on some of the other characters mentioned in this book, though, you can also dive in to *Dance of Deception*, Carmine and Lyra's story. There's even a sneak peek of that book on the following pages for you.

Fair warning: bring your running shoes…

You can find complete book lists and suggested reading orders on my website.
www.jaggercolewrites.com

Scroll on for a sneak peek of *Dance of Deception*.

(To avoid confusion: please remember that this book takes place before Val discovered his brother, and still believed that his own name was Vaughn.)

* * *

Chapter 1
Lyra

Ballet isn’t art. It’s war disguised as grace.

“Again.”

Every muscle in my body is on the point of collapse, but Madame Kuzmina doesn’t care. She sits in her seat, dead center, four rows back from the stage, watching us like a hawk from the shadows beyond the lights, her fingers steepled under her chin.

Vaughn exhales sharply beside me, his jaw clenched. Brooklyn doesn’t bother holding back her groan. She collapses forward, hands on her knees, sucking in air like we’ve just run a marathon.

“We’ve done it four fucking times already,” she mutters under her breath.

Madame Kuzmina raises a single hand, glittering with rings, in a regal motion. She doesn’t need to raise her voice. Her stare alone is enough to suffocate.

“And now you will do it a fifth,” she says quietly in her Russian-tinged accent, “because the fourth was fucking *garbage*.”

Vaughn and I exchange a glance. His crystal blue eyes flicker with amusement, but I don’t return the smile. I'm too exhausted.

There’s no crying in baseball. And there sure as *shit* isn’t any smiling in ballet.

Brooklyn straightens with a sigh, smoothing a hand over her leotard. “Fifth time’s the charm?” she mutters.

We begin again, running through the *pas de trois*. My mind goes blank the way it always does when I dance—nothing but the music and the movement. Vaughn’s hands on my waist, firm but controlled, lifting me effortlessly. Brooklyn spinning into position beside us.

We run through the *entire* thing again before hitting our end position perfectly, Brooklyn and I on either side of Vaughn, and for the first time

tonight, Madame Kuzmina doesn’t tell us to do it again.

Instead, she nods.

Once.

“That will do. For now.”

I hide the relief washing over me in a wave. Vaughn lets go of our hands with a dramatic groan, then flops onto his back at center stage, staring up at the ornate ceiling.

“Ballet is a fucking disease,” he announces to the air.

Brooklyn rolls her eyes and nudges his leg with her foot. “At least you get to wear flats.”

“Trust me, princess, you do not want to see me on pointe.”

Despite my exhaustion, I smile. Vaughn is chaos wrapped in infuriatingly incredible talent. When he's dancing, he moves with an effortless grace. Off stage he’s all sharp edges and wild energy, a stray dog that’s never been fully domesticated.

Madame Kuzmina rises to her feet, rearranging the silk draped over her arms. “We begin again at nine tomorrow. Arrive warmed up and ready to go.”

With that, she wraps her shawl around herself like Maleficent’s robes and melts up the darkened aisle of the Mercury Opera House, disappearing into the shadows. There’s a brief flicker of light as the door to the lobby opens and then closes again.

Naomi appears at the edge of the stage, twirling her water bottle in one hand and nodding in the direction Madame Kuzmina has gone. “Such a ray of fucking sunshine,” she deadpans.

Vaughn rolls onto his stomach. “And yet she loves me.”

Brooklyn snorts. “She tolerates you.”

Vaughn winks, pushing himself up. “Tolerates, loves, same difference.”

I shake my head and turn toward the wings, heading for the dressing room. My legs ache, and even my skin feels tired. I need a hot shower and about fourteen hours of sleep.

The dressing room is empty, since the rehearsal day was done long ago. But Madame decided to focus her keen eye on Brooklyn, Vaughn, and I and had us stay late, since we're the ones performing the pas de trois in *Swan Lake*, which the Zakharova will be performing in a few months' time.

Naomi follows me in, already undoing her bun. She's our Odette/Odile, aka, Swan Queen, for the upcoming performance. And her reason for staying late has nothing to do with Madame Kuzmina and everything to do with *herself*.

No matter how many times you tell Naomi she's amazing, she refuses to listen. I swear, the girl drinks imposter syndrome smoothies for breakfast.

"Tell me you're coming out with us this weekend," she coaxes, leaning against her locker. "Or are you going to pretend you have an exciting social life when we both know you don't?"

I smirk. "Tempting, but I need sleep more than overpriced cocktails."

As if I could *afford* overpriced cocktails. Or reasonably priced ones. Actually, even happy hour pricing might be off the table given my current financial situation.

Naomi groans. "You're such a grandma."

Brooklyn drops onto the bench beside me. "I might actually be dead by the weekend," she mutters. "Kuzmina is a fucking sadist."

"I think the word you're looking for is *Russian.*" Naomi grins.

Vaughn appears in the doorway, shoving his fingers through his shaggy dark hair. "Personally, I like my women with a touch of organized crime."

Brooklyn makes a face. "You would. And get *out*, dude. Guys' dressing room is down the hall, in case you've forgotten."

"But I get so lonely all by myself." He grins smugly before he peels off his t-shirt and slings it over his shoulder.

Vaughn has the sort of body that can only be described as “sinful”. The motherfucker has like zero percent body fat, is freaking *ripped*, and is covered in strategically placed tattoos. Coupled with his Mediterranean skin tone and vaguely Italian looks, it’s easy to see why his social calendar is perpetually filled—with dates with both sexes, I should add.

Vaughn strolls over to a locker and opens it before he turns to wink at Brooklyn. “You know I keep a second locker with my shit in here. And relax, it’s not like any of you are my type.”

He starts to take off his tights. Yeah, that’s my cue to turn around and avert my eyes. Sinful body or not, Vaughn's and my relationship—pretty much his relationship with any of the girls in the company—is more sibling-like than anything else.

Brooklyn snorts as she peels off her own tights and leotard and replaces them with underwear and yoga pants.

“I thought that your ‘type’ was ‘has a pulse and at least one willing hole’.”

“Pulses are overrated,” he grins.

“*Dude*,” Brooklyn makes sour face and shakes her head.

Vaughn laughs as he turns around, now at least wearing boxers. “Like you’d ever let me near you, baby girl.”

Brooklyn wrinkles her nose as she tosses on a hoodie. “Gross?”

Vaughn shrugs. “The feeling is mutual, and I say that with love. No, what I mean is, I don’t play hard to get. If someone doesn’t want me, I’m already gone. You want this…?”

The three of us collectively roll our eyes as he runs a finger down his ludicrously defined abs and cups his dick through his boxers.

“You have to show me you want it.”

“Yeah, hard pass, *friendo*,” Brooklyn says dryly.

“Again, the feeling is entirely mutual, baby girl.”

I giggle, turning to haul my dance bag out of my locker. I wriggle out of my leotard and wrap a towel around myself getting ready to shower, then dig through the bag, fingers searching for my MetroCard. But all I find are a few loose quarters and a crumpled one-dollar bill.

Shit. Not enough for the subway home.

I press my lips together and force the knot of frustration down.

I reach for my water bottle, catching my reflection in the mirror hanging on the inside of the locker door. My brow furrows, my gaze lingering on the way my collarbones are more prominent than they were a few months ago.

“Here.”

I jolt, turning at the sound of Naomi’s voice. She doesn’t make a big deal out of it, but passes me a granola bar.

“I’m good.”

My friend cocks one brow. “I don’t want it,” she says evenly. “So—take it.” Her eyes stay on mine. “And *eat it*,” she adds quietly.

I smile wryly as I peel open the wrapper, taking a small nibble. Naomi doesn’t know everything about my life, but she knows enough to see when things are…slipping.

Like me, Naomi is making it work by herself on her dancer's salary, somehow. The difference is, she’s got a safety net if she *really* needs it. You’d have to stick a gun to her head before she'd call her congressman father to ask for help. But the option is there.

For me, it's not. My safety net was gone long before the monster who was my father bled out in a prison cell.

Brooklyn and Vaughn are talking loudly about Kir Nikolayev, the very enigmatic Bratva kingpin who owns and bankrolls the Zakharova Ballet… specifically, how “fuckable” he is…when Naomi and I leave them and trudge to the showers.

The ache of the extra-long day melts just a little as the hot water pours down over me.

“Hey… You’re good, right?”

I turn to glance over at Naomi, who’s rinsing off at the next showerhead.

I know what she means.

“Yeah, I’m…fine.”

She pushes her long, dark hair out of her face and gives me a piercing look. “For real?”

I exhale. “Yeah, it’s just…” I shake my head. “I’m starting to wonder if school on top of this is too much.”

Between the credits I got for advanced classes in high school, and the college courses I took a few years ago, I’m about two-thirds of the way to a degree in human psychology. The lofty goal is that when ballet eventually ends—whenever that is—I’ll try my luck at the MCATs and med school, and try to become a clinical psychiatrist.

Hey, I *did* say “lofty”.

Naomi exhales as she turns to rinse off her back. “Yeah, pre-med *does* sound like a lot on top of this, even part time.” She glances at me, her brow still cocked. “Is that all?”

Goddammit, this girl always sees right through me.

“Vera’s been gambling again.”

She groans. “Are you fucking serious? I thought your mom was banned from every casino and racetrack in the state.”

“Yeah, well, she must’ve found *someone* who lets her place bets through them.”

“Shit.” Naomi frowns. “Look, I know you hate—”

“We’ll be fine,” I smile as I turn the water off. “But thanks for the offer.”

She nods, not pushing it.

Vaughn and Brooklyn are already dressed and somehow *still* talking about Kir's "big dick energy" when we get back from the showers. I pull on yoga pants and a hoodie before I remember the lack of means to get home tonight. I wince as I glance at Naomi.

"Hey, you wouldn't have a spare MetroCard on you, would you?"

Naomi's eyes flick toward my bag, where the pitiful collection of change still sits in the front pocket. She doesn't comment on it, just reaches into her wallet and pulls out her MetroCard, pressing it into my palm.

"Just take it. I'll grab a cab with Vaughn."

"Are you sure?"

She snorts. "Yeah, because I *love* the subway at midnight." She shoulders her dance bag and gives me a pointed look. "Text me when you get home, please."

Vaughn stretches dramatically, slinging an arm around Naomi's shoulders as he leads her toward the door. "My chariot awaits, milady." He sticks a cigarette between his lips, making Naomi squint.

"You light that thing anywhere near me and I'm going to knee you in the balls."

"Don't threaten me with a good time, girl."

The door swings shut behind them, leaving only silence.

Brooklyn is still sitting on the bench, one leg tucked under her, absentmindedly running a finger over the edge of her pointe shoe ribbon. The tension in her body from the exhausting rehearsal has shifted to something else.

She doesn't look at me when she finally speaks.

"You ever think about how much this actually costs us?"

I frown as I throw my gingery-red hair into a messy bun. "What? Ballet?"

She exhales sharply, shaking her head. "Not just ballet. This life. The work, all the training, the barely-there paycheck." She glances at me, one brow

lifting. “We kill ourselves every day for what? The honor of being underpaid and having a career that's over before it's even begun?”

Brooklyn’s like me: making her dance dream work on her own. No safety net.

I don’t answer right away. Truth is, I have thought about it. Every single time I pull together enough cash for rent but not groceries. Every time I ache all over but know I’ll still be back at the barre the next morning.

Brooklyn clears her throat. “Look, I understand pride, Lyra. And I’m not going to insult you by asking if you want a loan or anything. But…” The corners of her lips curl as she reaches into her bag.

My jaw drops as she pulls out a *gangster*-sized wad of cash.

“If you *do* need money…”

I blink at the thick stack of crisp hundreds, folded neatly. More cash than I’ve seen in…ever.

“What the fuck, Brooklyn?”

She smirks. “Relax. I didn’t rob a bank.”

I tear my gaze away from the money, forcing my voice to stay level. “Then where…?”

She exhales slowly. “Remember that charity thing where we did that excerpt from *Giselle* last month?”

Occasionally, mostly because it *always* results in new benefactors with deep pockets, select members of the company will perform at things like the Policemen’s Ball or other charity events.

Brooklyn clears her throat. “Well, after we were done, this guy came up to me and said he had a dance gig I might be interested in. He said he couldn’t tell me much about it, but that it paid insanely well. And… I took it. That’s where this money came from.”

A strange prickle works its way down my spine.

Brooklyn must notice the change on my face, because she quickly shakes her head. “Look, it’s not stripping or anything. No one touches you—no one even speaks to you. And you’re wearing clothes. But it pays way better than this.” She gestures vaguely around us at the dressing room. “It’s also secret.”

The word makes something inside me tighten.

Secret is never good. Secret always comes at a price.

“What do you mean, *secret*?”

Brooklyn twists the ends of her hoodie strings around her finger. “It’s like a private club or something. They pick you up at a location they decide, blindfold you, and drive you there.”

My jaw drops.

“Are you fucking serious? Brooklyn, that’s super sketch!”

She huffs a quiet laugh. “Yeah, I thought so too, at first.”

I narrow my eyes. “*At first*?”

She shrugs. “It wasn’t as bad as I thought. You change in a dressing room, where the blindfold comes off. There were six other girls—all dancers.”

“And then?”

Brooklyn exhales, her voice quieter now. “They give us fresh blindfolds, masks, and earbuds that play music synced with a voice directing us. Someone took us all out to a performance space, and—we danced.”

I don’t like how that makes my skin prickle.

“For how many people?”

She shakes her head. “No idea. I never saw them. Never heard them. But they were there, I could feel it.”

I swallow thickly.

What the fuck.

She holds up the wad of money, her brow cocking significantly. “Lyra, they pay five fucking grand for *four hours*.”

My stomach lurches.

Five. Thousand. Dollars.

That’s rent, food, security. That’s a way out from the hole my mother seems to be completely hellbent on in digging us into.

Brooklyn watches me carefully. “Listen… again, I get pride, Lyra. But I saw you counting coins…” She lifts her shoulders. “They said they might be looking for more dancers. So if you wanted…”

I shiver, feeling the invitation linger between us like a lit fuse. I swallow, eying the money in her hand.

“Look, for now…” She hands me two twenties. “Will you just take a cab home? Seriously, the subway is dangerous this late. Please? And if you’re interested in the job… Here's the number for my contact.” She finds an entry on her phone and texts it to me.

Pride wants me to refuse the money politely.

Common sense and the prospect of spending hours underground with my fingers wrapped around my keys wins out.

“Thanks,” I say quietly, taking the money. “Seriously, thank you. I’ll pay you back.”

* * *

The night air is crisp, biting at my skin as I pull my hoodie tighter around me.

“Wanna just share my Uber?” Brooklyn nods at the car waiting at the top of the alley behind the theater.

I exhale. “Maybe, actually.” I shoot her a wry smile. “I feel like you’re pampering me tonight.”

She giggles. “I mean, *yeah*. You’re my girl. C’mon.”

I start to follow her. When I slip my hand into my hoodie pocket, I groan.

“Shit.”

Brooklyn glances back. “What’s up?”

My face droops. “I left my phone in the dressing room.” I shake my head. “You know what? Go ahead. You already gave me money for a cab. I’ll just do that.”

She frowns. “Don’t be silly. I’ll wait for you.”

“Nah, go get your ride. It’s late. But thanks. And…for earlier.”

“Anytime, girl. See you tomorrow for more Russian gulag conditioning?”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” I groan.

I watch as she tugs her coat around herself, scampers up the alley, and slips into the waiting vehicle, red taillights disappearing into the night.

The door hisses shut behind me as I duck back into the warmth of the dim, silent ballet theater. My steps are quick as I make my way toward the dressing room.

It only takes a minute to find my phone and I stuff it into my hoodie pocket, shaking my head before slipping back outside.

This time, the door clicks shut behind me with finality.

The street is mostly empty now, the occasional honk of a distant car the only sound. The alley behind the Mercury splits halfway up to the street: continuing straight puts you onto Madison Avenue, which runs one-way north: perfect for Brooklyn, who lives up toward Harlem. But if I take the left-handed side-cut out of the alley, it’ll dump me on East 49th Street, where it's easier to get a cab going *downtown*, to the apartment I, unfortunately, share with my mother in Hell's Kitchen.

I ignore the creepy sensation that being here at midnight always brings as I hustle up the alley. I’m just about to turn the corner and head out to East

49th when I hear voices.

Low. Rough. Male.

I freeze.

The words are hushed, but I can still hear them. A weird shiver ripples up my spine as I do.

“What are you doing here? Bianca got out of rehearsal hours ago.”

The first voice is rough-sounding, deep, and somewhat frightening, with a dangerous edge to it.

My stomach knots at Bianca’s name.

Bianca got out of rehearsal hours ago.

Bianca as in Bianca Barone—well, Bianca *Drakos* now that she’s married—who's in the Zakharova with me. She’s an *incredible* dancer, super sweet, and is the youngest daughter in the Barone Italian mafia family.

I suck in a breath, pressing my back against the brick wall, forcing myself deeper into the shadows.

“No shit. I’m not here for her,” a second man growls. “What are *you* doing here, you psycho?” His voice is deep and dark, too, but also edged in something savage and viciously alluring, like a blade dragging down my spine or a dark promise whispered in my ear.

The first guy exhales sharply, irritated. “It was stupid and reckless for Matteo to hire her.”

My pulse hammers.

Her who?

“She dances *here*,” the first guy growls. “She’s friends with people like your sister. She could talk—”

“She was blindfolded, you dumb fuck,” the second man snaps. “And just what was your plan, exactly?”

The first man huffs out a breath. “I was just going to scare her a little,” he rumbles. “Remind her that the money she was paid ensures silence.”

Something inside me goes cold as things fall into place. I’m pretty sure they’re talking about *Brooklyn.*

The second man’s voice sharpens. “Stay the fuck away from where my sister dances, understand?”

There’s a tense, prolonged pause.

“Fine.” A slow exhale, like a forced truce.

“Is that a *yes* fine, or an *I’m blowing smoke up your ass* fine.”

“It’s a yes fine, calm down,” the first guy grunts. “Anyway, in unrelated news, Mushkin hasn’t responded to our summons.”

The second guy—the one with authority in his voice, the one who's driving the conversation—lets out a dark chuckle. “People rarely actually respond to a Black Court summons.”

I shrink further against the wall.

“They respond in behavior, at least,” the first guy mutters. “Mushkin hasn’t hired more security, fled, moved money. None of it. His schedule is still clear for the night of the trial, though.”

“You know how it is,” the second guy says, his voice smoother now. “Sometimes they’re so confident that they show up willingly.”

The first guy laughs, low and dark. “And if not…” He pauses, amusement dripping from his voice. “Then we get the fun of hunting them down before we even get to the chase.”

A slow shiver slides down my spine.

“Reach out to The Wolf and The Stag,” the second man orders. “Let them know the status on Mushkin. The Black Court will meet as planned.”

The Wolf? The Stag?

The *Black Court*?

Nothing about this conversation makes sense.

The sound of footsteps grows louder. They're splitting up. I panic, pressing myself deeper into the shadows, willing my body to melt into the cold brick.

Then I flinch, freezing in place as a figure rounds the corner and suddenly looms over me.

Tall. Menacing. Powerful.

Suddenly, I'm looking straight into the cold, piercing blue eyes of Carmine Barone.

My stomach drops.

I've seen him before—either dropping off or picking up Bianca, or sometimes at performances or some of those charity events. But this is different.

Up close, he's even more intense than he is at a distance. This near, he radiates raw power—and something darker, coiled beneath the surface, waiting to strike like a lethal, venomous snake. He's wearing a dark suit and an open pea-coat, molded to his broad shoulders and powerful arms like a suit of armor.

It's like black lightning striking from the shadows. Before I can even blink, his hand is suddenly on my throat, his fingers wrapping around it and settling against my jugular. It's not a choke—just a warning. A display of his strength. His power.

His control.

My breath catches.

"I—I didn't hear anything," I whisper, the words tumbling out too fast, too desperate.

His grip tightens slightly but he says nothing for a moment, those cold blue eyes piercing into me like knives, as if he's flaying open my very soul to peer inside and feast on what he finds.

His thumb traces over my pulse. “No one asked you about anything you may or may not have heard.”

A tremor ripples through my body, my eyes widening even further.

“Who *are* you?” he finally murmurs darkly, his voice low, focused, and almost sensual in the way it teases over my skin.

My heart thunders in my chest and my throat works against his hand.

“N-nobody,” I whisper again. “I’m nobody.”

Carmine’s lips curl, something between a smirk and a snarl.

“Nobody…” he muses.

His grip lingers, his fingers still firm around my throat, pressing just enough that I can feel the subtle pressure against my pulse. A test. A game.

A reminder that he could crush me if he wanted to.

His thumb moves slightly, stroking the base of my throat like he’s considering something. My skin burns where he touches me, body locked in place, muscles coiled tight. I don’t flinch. I don’t dare.

His head tilts, studying me like I’m something strange and unexpected.

“What did you hear?” His voice is a low rasp.

I shake my head as much as his grip allows. “Nothing,” I breathe.

Carmine hums, unconvinced. “Nothing?”

I gulp. “I-I was just leaving the theater. I didn’t—I wasn’t paying attention.”

His grip tightens for a second, just enough to make my pulse spike against his hand before he eases up again. “Funny,” he murmurs. “People who’ve heard nothing don’t usually look this scared.”

I open my mouth, then close it again, forcing my breathing to stay even. He’s testing me, waiting to see if I’ll break.

I can’t do that.

Men like him eat weakness for breakfast.

My fingers clench into fists at my sides. “You… You startled me, is all.”

“If this is *startled*, I’d love to see what it looks like when you’re *truly* scared.”

He says it like a desire. Like he’s already thinking about getting off to the idea of my fear.

Carmine watches me for a beat longer. Then, finally, he lets go. I suck in a breath, my skin prickling where his hand was on my throat, the ghost of his touch lingering like a brand.

He takes a slow step back, his sharp blue gaze never leaving mine.

“Well, Miss Nobody who heard nothing,” he murmurs, his lips curling into an amused and cruel almost-smile. “Let’s hope it stays that way.”

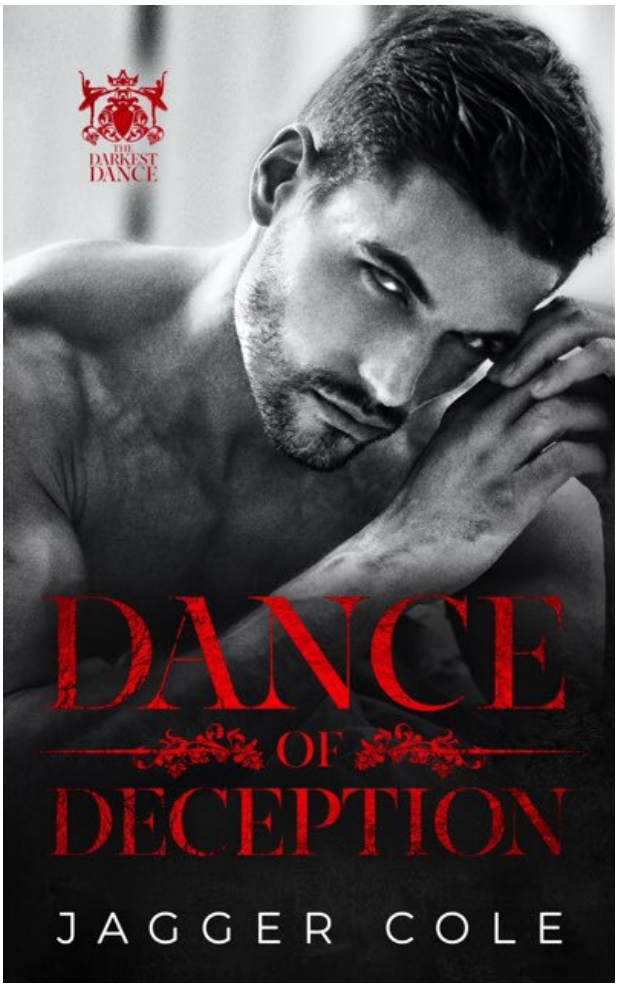
And then, just as quickly as he appeared, he’s gone, and the alley is silent once more.

The air feels heavy, charged, like the ghost of him is still standing there, watching me.

I don’t move. I don’t breathe.

Then my legs finally unlock and I’m able to stumble forward, pulse still hammering, his words pressing heavily on my spine and dragging over my skin like hot knives.

Keep reading!



[Dance of Deception - Exclusively on Amazon and in Kindle Unlimited!]

* * *

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Broken Lines

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Stalker of Mine

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END NOTES

If you or a loved one is facing mental health struggles, emotional distress, alcohol or drug use concerns, or just need someone to talk to, help is available.
You are loved, and you are not alone.

U.S. National Mental Health Hotline:
Phone: 988
https://988lifeline.org/

LGBTQ+ youth mental health support:
Phone: 1-866-488-7386
Text: START to 678678.
TheTrevorProject.org/Get-Help

List of international help hotlines:
https://blog.opencounseling.com/suicide-hotlines/

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A reader first and foremost, Jagger Cole cut his romance writing teeth penning various steamy fan-fiction stories years ago. After deciding to hang up his writing boots, Jagger worked in advertising pretending to be Don Draper. It worked enough to convince a woman way out of his league to marry him, though, which is a total win.

Now, Dad to two little princesses and King to a Queen, Jagger is thrilled to be back at the keyboard.

When not writing or reading romance books, he can be found woodworking, enjoying good whiskey, and grilling outside - rain or shine.

You can find all of his books at
www.jaggercolewrites.com

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